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DELICIA



D E L I C I A



D E L I C I A

BY THE
AUTHOR OF 'MISS MOLLY'
'EUGENIE,' ETC.

"For I say that it is no folie to change
conseil when the thing is changed, or elles
when the thing semeth otherwise than it
semed afore."

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D E L I C I A.



CHAPTER I.

THE HOUR.

"There is a kind of character in thy life,
That to the observer doth thy history
Fully unfold."

THERE is, in a certain part of London, which the tide of fashion has long since passed by, an old-fashioned square, which, although its original brightness and liveliness have long since departed, yet still retains relics of ancient grandeur; even as a court belle in losing youth and beauty never quite relinquishes the stately presence or graceful movements that once characterised her.

Let us give the name of Anne Square to this far-off territory, being bound to call it something; but let us question not too particularly as to the exact spot where it is marked on the map, for we would prefer not to be asked to be very minute as to our

geography. Suffice it therefore to remark, only by way of description, that its houses are for the most part like many other houses in the duller parts of London, — uniform in size and appearance; the only exceptions to this rule being No. 39, where a portion of the roof has been taken away, and glass substituted, denoting the residence of an artist, or perhaps of some one with photographic tendencies; —and No. 1, the windows of which are bright with flowers, even at this late season—a luxurious taste not shared by the other inhabitants of Anne Square.

Such is Anne Square as well as we can describe it; and seeing it as we do now, on a dull, foggy November evening, it is certainly possessed of a most forbidding aspect; nevertheless there are people to be found who have lived and died there, who would not, at any period of their existence, have exchanged their residence therein for a palace elsewhere.

But for all that, on this particular evening, raw and chilly, with a November fog gaining thickness and yellowness with the approach of night, with the dying leaves on the stunted Square trees dripping with moisture, it would be difficult to decide wherein its exact charm lay.

With truth we may speedily decide it is not out of doors, so now let us look within.

No. 1 is the corner house and the largest in the Square. Its drawing-room possesses three windows, whereof two afford a view of the decaying leaves and plants in the Square garden, and of No. 39, which stands directly opposite; whilst one looks on to Anne Street, which is the con-

necting link between Anne Square and the busy bustling world that lies beyond.

The room itself is a pleasant one, with old-fashioned furniture, and quaint bits of old china and several good paintings enlivening the gloom of its walls; at least you would see all this if your visit were paid in daylight, and not, as now, between the lights of a November afternoon, with a thick fog outside to boot.

By the hearth, in a wide arm-chair, is seated the owner of the house, and sole occupant of the apartment. The fire is bright and cheerful, and the small kettle singing on the hob might even incline one to forget the gloom without. For when it is too early for candles, and too dark to sew or read, or do anything an austere world might demand by way of occupation, surely one can make one's self very happy, dreaming dreams by the fireside, above all, if one be young.

But if one can only conjure up ghosts? Ah, then, perhaps then the twilight does not prove so welcome. At least it is to be observed that as people grow older they care less for semi-darkness and more for gas and moderator lamps.

But it is time for us to cease speculating; instead, let us see what manner of woman this is into whose house we have intruded, and whose solitude we have broken. Delicia Mainwaring is no longer a girl; she is, indeed, I am afraid, even when seen by the flickering firelight, nearer thirty than twenty. Does that cause your interest in her to die out at once? I fear, to many it will. To those many who

care only for the lilies and roses of extreme youth, twenty-six will seem very old, and the joys and sorrows of a woman who has reached that mature age matters of but small importance. And yet, if the truth were told, the story of a woman who has passed her twenty-fifth year is, as a rule, far more interesting than the account of those trifles which make up the history of a girl.

She has lived—in all probability she has suffered, and through the suffering has gained sympathy, which is the magic guide to the hearts of others. Often, maybe, she does not know herself wherefore it is that, as the grey hairs begin to show amongst the brown ones, and the brilliancy of her complexion to fade, she finds that she makes truer, warmer friends, than in the days when, admired of all, she went forth but to conquer—forgetting that the conqueror does not always win as much *love* as the conquered.

And young girls in general are so hard, so unsympathetic, so occupied with their own little pleasures or worries, of which they must and will talk, that they rarely can spare a moment to listen to the recital of the joys and sorrows of others. Therefore men, and women too, of the “proud-wife-and-mother” type pass them by after a dance or a few words, and go further on seeking sympathy,—on to one who is a little older—one who has passed the age for fretting over some one dancing whilst she is looking on, or worrying over the other thousand and one troubles of girlhood.

From all this you must not deduce the fact that

Delicia Mainwaring is one of those sweet, fascinating, ideal women whom we have been led away into speaking of, for the description would scarcely apply to her; only in allusion to her age we wished to say that the mere fact of her having passed her twenty-sixth year does not *of necessity* render a woman less interesting than when she was younger. Indeed, we fear it must be owned that at that age women are often dangerous rivals to sweet seventeen.

Now, however, let us have done with generalities, and return to Miss Mainwaring as she sits in the arm-chair in her firelit drawing-room. Her face, as you can see it in the mingling of twilight and firelight, is somewhat hard,—not one, at first sight, which would attract people to pour out the tale for which they seek a sympathetic listener. No—it is not one which would encourage you to bestow a confidence; and yet you might feel quite certain that the confidence once bestowed, the holder of the secret would be true as steel. A hard face decidedly, despite its beauty, which no one could deny, though many might be found who did not admire it; for the dark-grey eyes, with their straight black lashes, were cold.

But before going any further, let us pause and consider the story of her life, and see how far it tallies with the lines of her face.

Left an orphan so long ago that she could recall neither of her parents, Delicia Mainwaring had, at four years of age, passed into the guardianship of an uncle and aunt, who had brought up their niece

kindly, if not tenderly, until she was fifteen, when it was decreed that she should be sent to school. Thither she went, at an age when she was old enough to discover that she was unlike other girls, and that her bringing up debarred her from caring to associate with those of her own age. So again she found herself alone, this time amongst many, and so had retreated more and more into herself, had made no friends; and when she at length left school, at the age of eighteen, had earned the reputation of being proud.

And then the next change life had in store for her was a home offered by a widowed uncle, who required a woman to keep house for him; and who more fitted to fill the post than his handsome niece, his sister's child, who was fair to look upon, who had been quietly brought up, and would therefore require no gaiety or any one to amuse her? An intelligent girl, who would find companions in books, and whose well-endowed, well-cultivated mind would prove a source of boundless wealth to her. So he argued in his selfish old age, calling himself, all the time, thoughtful, charitable, Christian—any names that were most likely to please himself; and the girl having nowhere else to go—the aunt who had cared for her in her girlhood being dead—accepted his offer.

Do not imagine, however, she dreaded the idea of the life before her. On the contrary, it was not at all displeasing to her. She had never been gifted with a capacity for making girl friends; therefore, when her uncle told her kindly, but firmly, that it

must be an understood thing that his house was not now to become a rendezvous for young people, she acquiesced willingly, telling him she knew no one in London (in the world she might have said) she cared to see.

So, everything thus settled to their mutual satisfaction, they had settled down into a quiet life together,—a life where, in the very heart of the busiest city in the world, but few beats reached her listening ears—a life where a few old friends of her uncle's dining, and playing a rubber of whist afterwards, constituted the only dissipation she ever knew.

Time passed. Year after year went by, and at length Mr Russell departed this life, full of years, leaving to his niece, Delicia Mainwaring, all his worldly goods whereof he died possessed, including the old house in Anne Square. If he had wasted her youth, he had provided well for her old age, and perhaps he considered the one a fair equivalent for the other.

Yes, everything was to be hers, on one condition. And the condition, if it surprised Delicia, and caused those who had known Mr Russell in his youth, to marvel at this proof that he had died unforgiving, even as he had lived, was not likely to prove of any consequence, seeing that the waves of this troublesome world had long ago closed over the head of the offender, who had won for himself Mr Russell's undying enmity.

"I think," said Delicia, on hearing the will read, "that uncle John meant to have made some alteration in it; for only that last night, the night he

died, he told me to send for Mr Somers in the morning. I wish he had had time," she went on, with tears in her eyes, "just to blot out those few words."

"Yes, I wish it too," said Mr Somers, who was standing near and listening to her words. "Most likely you are right, for the will is a very old one. However, it does not really make any difference—it *cannot*, indeed, now."

"No," replied Delicia; "that is to me the sad part of it, that it cannot make any difference now."

Perhaps you will understand better now how it is that with such a blank, empty past, the firelight holds but few charms for Delicia. A girl can fill up the hours with dreaming of a possible future; a woman with remembrances of the past; but to one who has lost the time for looking forward, and has nothing to look back upon, the twilight is but little to be desired.

From these words, pray do not imagine that Miss Mainwaring considered herself to be "superior." She did not wish to hold herself aloof; she was not a man-hater, or any other specimen of womanhood peculiar to the nineteenth century. She was simply one who had been unaccustomed all her life to much society of any kind, and who had therefore had but scant opportunity to learn the pleasing manners and ready jest and smile that the world demands from its women audience; and men, as a rule, being fortresses that like not to be taken by storm, but prefer a wily enemy who will cause them to surrender foot by foot, had not seen

much to care for in her, she not being a woman who could avail herself of the stepping-stones of friendship or flirtation,—stepping-stones so many make use of to reach the other side—matrimony.

And for this reason, not because she wanted a heart, but because no one had as yet found the royal road to it, at six-and-twenty she was Delicia Mainwaring still.

Ere long Miss Mainwaring seemed to find gazing into the fire but a dreary way of passing the time, for she rose and began pacing slowly up and down, now and again pausing to look forth into the foggy Square, and oftener still across to where the lights shone in the windows of the house opposite.

Then at length, with something that sounded very like a sigh, she turned back into the darkening room and rang for tea. But before it came there was a peal at the door-bell, and she looked round with an expression of pleased expectancy when the door was opened to admit a visitor.

The tinge of disappointment that came over her face was so slight as to be scarcely perceptible as her guest was ushered into the room, the footman saying as he opened the door, "Miss Arbuthnot."

How was it, I wonder, that with her natural unsociability, Delicia had contrived to make a friend of Cicely Arbuthnot? Yet perhaps, after all, there was small cause for wonder; the very dissimilarity might have proved the attraction. So young, so pretty—so very pretty, some people said—and motherless; small wonder was it that Delicia's empty heart, remembering her own desolate,

orphaned youth, warmed towards her, and seeing plainly enough—as who indeed could not?—the faults and foibles of the girl, yet loved her tenderly.

Rather a one-sided affection, it is to be feared, although perhaps Miss Arbuthnot would be astonished if she knew on which side the balance lay, for it is so difficult to get always quite to the root even of our own thoughts and acts. And for various reasons Cicely Arbuthnot found the quiet drawing-room in Anne Square a pleasant change from her own home, with its little disagreeables, its little worries; the children always requiring to be scolded or amused; and, more trying still, a younger sister pushing her way upward with a strong determination to share the throne which her elder had hitherto occupied alone. Therefore, on the whole, it was a pleasant variety in her cheerful young life to have made friends with old Miss Mainwaring, who, having long ceased to be young herself, and having of course little of her own wherein to interest herself, had always plenty of time to sympathise with her girl friend. And to the girl friend it was pleasant to feel she was a welcome guest whenever she chose to go and spend an hour in Anne Square,—an hour in which she reigned supreme, in which she could hold forth uninterruptedly on whatever question of the moment was most disturbing her—an hour in which she could blow her brazen trumpet loudly and boldly, with no fear of the sound being caught up and repeated in the shrill discordant din of a younger sister's penny whistle; or yet more dis-

astrous still, of being drowned in the grander, more sonorous cries of some one else's war-notes. No, there was no fear of this.

Miss Mainwaring had nothing to tell of herself. She was always a willing listener; and herein, I think, lay her principal charm for Cicely. Am I drawing her somewhat harshly? I hope not. For in truth her faults were, after all, chiefly the faults of youth.

She had been admired and loved all her life long, and with just cause. For she is indeed very pretty. Brown hair with red gleams in it, brown eyes, a slight figure, and pretty hands which she had a trick of moving about in a graceful, un-English fashion: what more could any man, or woman either, require?

And to all this let us add an aptitude for doing everything in a slight, cursory way; and was there any wonder that she deluded herself, and mistook her smattering of accomplishments for talent—genius even—and her quick answers for wit, and was in consequence often more pleased with herself than there was any cause to warrant? But after all, as I said before, conceit is a youthful failing which often passes away under the influence of the sterner, harder trials of after-life.

Therefore let us cease to think of her failings for the present, and be satisfied instead with the pretty young face and figure.

"Where have you been this afternoon that you are so smartly dressed?" asked Delicia, looking admiringly at the delicately tinted face lifted to hers.

"I have been forming part of an audience at a musical afternoon at Lady Neville's, which I very soon grew tired of."

"Was it dull?"

"Mr Rayton was not there."

"I suppose I am to take that as an answer to my question?" and Delicia smiled a little amused smile.

"It may have had something to do with it; but anyhow it was dull, and I was bored, and rather cross: and in addition to everything else, I felt certain that when I got home I should find Jessie in a long dress seated in the drawing-room hoping for visitors; and the very idea of it so aggravated me that I determined to come here and have a cup of tea to calm my nerves before going on."

A little pause, in which Delicia poured out the tea.

That accomplished, Cicely spoke again.

"It is too bad. I was not allowed to wear a long dress, much less receive visitors, until I was seventeen; and Jessie was only sixteen last March! But it is all Miss Heaton's doing. She is fond of Jessie, and she always hated me; and now that they dine late, I never seem to see papa alone; and the end of it will be that he will like *her* the best of the two, and I shall be miserable."

"My dear, what a long speech! If you talk like that I shall soon grow quite fond of Jessie, and begin to believe she is rather an ill-used person."

"Well, if you do, Delicia, after the way you have always treated *me* as your friend, I shall never come

to see you any more. I should think you both mean and treacherous; and as to laughing at what I tell you, which I am sure you are doing, I cannot think it is a laughing matter. I should hate to hear of *any one* being so spoilt; but naturally when it is my own sister it is twenty times worse."

There were tears in the girl's eyes as she turned to Delicia—real tears, brought there, no doubt, by jealousy and temper and a variety of other foolish reasons, but real tears for all that; and Delicia, seeing them there, by dint of forcing herself to remember that the pin-pricks of youth hurt as much at the moment as the sword-cuts of more mature age, abstained from remarking, as she felt inclined to do—she having small sympathy with imaginary troubles—that a time would probably arrive when the precocity, the forwardness of a younger sister, would not hold a great place amongst the trials of life.

So she adroitly turned the conversation away from the subject of home difficulties, and soon the tears gave place to smiles and laughter.

"A quarter to six!" at length cried Miss Arbuthnot. "Please, Delicia, will you ask Grey to call me a cab? I must go home now, though I am sorry," she added with a sigh, and walking to the window as she spoke—"very sorry." And even after Miss Mainwaring had rung the bell and given the order to the servant, she still stood looking out into the foggy Square, as if loath to go away.

"By the by, Delicia, do you see much of your opposite neighbours?"

"Yes, a good deal."

"What does the family consist of?"

"Two grown-up daughters, a son, and I do not know how many small children."

"Do you like them?"

"Very much. They are pleasant and very original. If you come over some afternoon, I will ask the girls to meet you."

"No, please don't, dear Delicia. I do not like girls—they do not like me. Ask Jessie; she would be delighted to come," she said, a little spitefully. "But what is the son like?" she added. "Do you see much of him? I have heard he is clever. Is he good-looking?"

"Yes, I think he is. Better still, he is very agreeable. I am sure you would like him, so I will ask him to meet you instead of the girls, if you would like that better."

"Yes, I am sure I should. Good-looking, and agreeable, and an artist—I am sure to like him."

"Till Mr Rayton comes back to town?"

"Yes, just so; till Mr Rayton comes back. But tell me before I go, when should I be most likely to see this Adonis, for I would much rather meet him promiscuously than have him asked on purpose to 'play with me.'"

"He often comes in about five o'clock for a cup of tea; indeed I rather wonder he was not here to-night, for I did not see him yesterday."

Miss Arbuthnot did not note the blush that accompanied the words—words significant enough in themselves, surely, to any one but a girl wrapped up

in her own somewhat selfish fancies. So she made no remark upon them; only said she would come over on the chance of finding him another evening, and then, with a farewell kiss, departed. Departed, feeling pleased with herself in that she had given a whole hour to the cheering up of dear, lonely Delicia! This, besides having prepared the way at the same time for a little amusement for herself during these dull, foggy days, when every one else was out of town. So she went down-stairs, feeling and looking radiant; and as she stood beneath the lamp, wrapping her furs about her, the glow from above illumining the red brown of her hair, and deepening the colour of her eyes, she of a sudden became aware that a man was standing in the more remote corner of the hall, divesting himself of a greatcoat, looking earnestly at her.

All of which she noticed, as girls have a way of noticing these things, letting no sign thereof appear as she stepped forth daintily out into the darkness. But once alone inside the cab that had been summoned to bear her homewards, "The artist, of course," she said; "and he *is* good-looking, though I didn't think Delicia and I should ever have agreed on such a subject." A minute later her lips curved into a well-satisfied smile as she recalled the admiring gaze she had seen that same good-looking man fix upon her.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN.

"You had better sail in the maddest storm that ever troubled your sea of life, than lie on the sea, and drift with every wind that chooses to blow."

THERE is a certain class of women whom the novelist and the world have alike agreed, notwithstanding many serious and grave faults, to judge leniently. The woman we speak of is always possessed of a pleasing exterior, and has many qualities that endear her to those about her. She is affectionate and clinging, and nearly always proves successful in attracting some one to stake his life's hopes on winning her for his own.

Once won, granted that the man be possessed of ordinary common-sense, she is won for ever, from the mere fact that it would never enter into her head to look beyond her home circle. It is the love, not the lover, that is necessary to her existence.

So she goes through life a woman much wrapped up in house and husband and children: a very happy, if perhaps a somewhat dull household, to casual observers. And the husband, if left alone,

would never discover that what he values as true coin is merely all that a shallow, affectionate disposition has to offer in lieu thereof.

But if, instead of a speedy wooing, a wedding, and a peaceable after-life, this nature has to combat with difficulties—say, for instance, a doubt between two suitors—or if her faithfulness should be tried by long separation, then the want of stamina must make itself apparent.

In the first instance, she would of a certainty espouse the one whose will, whether for good or evil, is the stronger; in the other, she would desert the absent—if not actually, at least in thought—for the one who is by her side, whoever that one may be.

These women are easily won, for they demand so little. It is the demonstrativeness of love they require, not the love itself. So outsiders who do not see very deep decide they are sweet and gentle, although, perchance, not strong-minded or clever, and they rarely, if ever, remain unmarried.

Now let us reverse the picture, and put a man in the place of the woman. "An unpleasing portrait," nearly every one will exclaim. Yet, perhaps, though such a one has been by competent judges determined to lie beyond the pale of mild criticism, and though the world in general has not a good word to say in his favour, yet for all that, surely it is not quite fair that he should get all the reproaches, and the woman escape scot-free.

By the novelist he is simply described as "weak," and such a man finds no pity shown him from lady

readers. A weak man—be he weak either in mind or body—is to them, and indeed to most people, simply despicable.

In real life, however, it is often otherwise. By men such a man might be a little pitied, a little despised; but often he is envied, because with women he would nearly always prove irresistible, such is the perversity of the sex.

“A great flirt,” they might say of him, “but very fascinating.”

And in this—in the portion of their verdict that bore reference to his flirting propensities—they would be entirely mistaken. For such a man would never wish to flirt; his conduct might bear a resemblance to the leading principles of that art, but it would be quite unintentional on his part.

He would take small trouble to please any one; but the woman who would do so would soon find that if she so considered it she had secured a prize. Afterwards—well, it would be afterwards that the different effects of the same causes in a man and a woman would make themselves apparent. For the man cannot, whatever may be his vocation in life, be shut up out of the way of temptation, with a nursery for a safe outlet. Notwithstanding the fact of his possessing a disposition that most unfits him to cope with temptation, he must go forth and dare the encounter; and it is the result of that encounter which probably determines his whole after-life.

Of this type was Cyril Stevens. Easily influenced, easily impressed; taking, as it were, a faint reflection from whatever was the strongest colouring

about him. Let me try to sketch him as he leans back in Miss Mainwaring's comfortable arm-chair, in the light of the newly-lit lamp.

A slight, well-made man of average height, with a face rather too thin for actual beauty, but an interesting face nevertheless, with its sallow complexion and dark-eyes. All the features, taken separately, are nearly perfect; and yet, considered as a whole, the effect is not quite pleasing. It may be that the eyes lack a little fire and brilliance, and that the droop of the lids is suggestive of effeminacy; or it may be that the delicate mouth, the lines of which tell of wit and culture when in repose, has a habit when the owner is speaking of losing that expression, and assuming in its stead one merely of gentleness—gentleness more suited to a woman's weakness than a man's strength. Somehow, whatever the cause may be, the features are out of keeping with the expression. The outline is, as it were, clearly and well drawn, but the finish which would render the picture perfect is lacking.

On his entrance Delicia had risen and greeted him quietly, gracefully, as she did everything; and with the air of one who found himself at home he drew an arm-chair up to the fire, saying as he did so, "Who was the young lady I saw in the hall just now? Miss Arbuthnot? Ah, I thought so. How pretty she is! I saw her in a fortunate way too. She was standing just beneath the lamp, and the light from above fell full upon her hair—beautiful hair it seemed to me."

"Yes, she is pretty, is she not? And a pleasant girl too. You must come and make acquaintance with her one of these days."

Not heeding Delicia's remark, "I thought," he continued, "I should like to paint her as St Cecilia."

"Had St Cecilia sisters?" asked Delicia, with a laugh.

"I do not know, Miss Mainwaring; but I will try and find out, if you really care about it."

"No, thank you," Miss Mainwaring replied, sobered immediately by his serious voice, for she was not a woman given to jokes, however small, at any time; but for the minute she had been amused at the idea presented to her slightly matter-of-fact mind of the discontented, fretful, tearful girl she had parted from a quarter of an hour ago, representing to any one's inward vision St Cecilia.

After that, however, she laughed no more, but leant forward with interest in her grey eyes, listening to an account of the outward life and inward struggles that had been Mr Stevens's during the two days that had elapsed since they had last met.

It was what he liked—what he needed, indeed. Let the listener be whom she may, provided it were a *she*, and he was quite content.

Think not from this we would wish to infer Mr Stevens was that tiresome man, of whom each one of us can number so many amongst our acquaintances—a man who bores us with accounts of his own vicissitudes and conquests, be they in Love or War, in the drawing-room or the hunting-field.

Quite the reverse. To most people Mr Stevens was delightful. He loved to talk of himself, certainly—and that subject is, as a rule, distasteful to the world—but somehow *he* did not jar upon his hearers. His language was always well chosen; he had read a great deal; he had passed all his life amongst clever people; and if not exactly a genius, he was possessed of a great deal of talent; and his mind, though not of the quick, working order, was reflective—one which speedily caught tints and colours from those about it.

He was not popular with the talking order of women; the quiet, interested listeners suited him better. He loved nothing more than to argue—with himself, *bien entendu*, for his conversation was in the form of a monologue—upon some given subject, some question of the day, building up a theory merely for the sake of knocking it down again; and for this, sympathetic eyes and an interested face were all that was needed in his *vis-à-vis*. Looking at them thus, he, with his slender hands outstretched to the blaze, speaking in that low, soft, confiding voice which is one of his greatest charms, and then from him to the gentle, gracious woman opposite, with everything about her hushed to attention, and you will at once see one of the attractive causes that first brought two such dissimilar natures into accord. Yes, therein had lain the root of this friendship. Cyril Stevens required a good listener, but in addition to that he required so much more. He demanded of this listener that, besides being interested and sympathetic, she should never be reminded

by his revelations of similar events, of which she had also been a witness; the case must never be reversed, and she be teacher and he taught.

So when fate had thrown him across Miss Mainwaring's path, he eagerly embraced the opportunity accorded him, and marked her out for a friend, using her as a moral prop for his own weakness.

And the end of it was, that she was speedily becoming necessary to his very existence—a portion, indeed, of his daily life; her charm consisting partly in the fact that, come when he would, he might take up his story exactly where he had left it off. For she was always the same—calm, unruffled by care or trouble; ever ready to sympathise with his plans for future greatness, or to listen to the things he had already attempted.

Every other woman with whom he came in contact was willing enough, perhaps, to listen also to that soft, winning voice, and to enter into his plans and dreams; but then he knew, although he did not care to think of it often, that when once he had gone, to these he was scarcely even a memory. They had their own interests, their own pursuits to attend to, and he, out of sight, was out of mind.

But with Delicia Mainwaring it was different. In her life there was no father or mother, no husband or child, whose life, being entwined with hers, would naturally cause an outsider's interests to appear but of very faint importance once he himself was no longer there. But from this trait in his character you must not imagine Cyril Stevens was a flirt in the ordinary acceptance of the word. He

never had any wish to rule every woman's heart for the mere pleasure of ruling, as is the case with so many. It was not the love of power that possessed him, but the love of love; and the stronger the character of the woman who influenced him, the greater was his chance of ultimate happiness.

But if he did not possess the jealousy of a lover, or even of a flirt, he did possess the exactingness of a somewhat small-souled being, to whom the larger sympathies, the wider love that can diffuse itself in several distinct channels, is totally incomprehensible. But we must cease scrutinising and criticising, and instead, attend to Mr Stevens talking over art and literature and other general topics; or rather, he having passed such things cursorily by, listen instead to the account he is giving of his own proceedings of the day before, which had prevented his appearing as usual during the course of the afternoon.

"Indeed, Miss Mainwaring, I feared I should not have been able to come to-day either, for I have been out of town."

"Far away?"

"Not so very far. But I required fresh air to enable me to think over a most serious subject, so I walked to Fulham, and when there, found it was so late that I had to spend the night there; and despite my getting up very early, it took me so many hours of thought again this morning before I felt sufficiently certain I had decided for the best, that I was not able to get back here until six o'clock."

"And is your mind at rest now?"

"No."

The answer surprised her, and she looked at him as if expecting he would say something in explanation, but he remained silent. At length he spoke again, passing his hand restlessly through his hair as he did so—a trick of his when perplexed and troubled. "No, I am all undecided again, and just when I thought I had quite determined how I should act."

"What is the difficulty?" she asked. "Is it anything in which I can help you?"

"No, no." But he spoke undecidedly, and having spoken, rose and walked once up and down the room; then, standing still, said, with a suddenness that startled her: "I cannot tell whether it is honourable—whether it is right—for a man without a penny in the world to wish to marry a rich woman!" He gave a little uneasy laugh then, and without looking at her, moved to the window, and lifting the blind, looked out into the now dark Square.

To any other woman but Delicia Mainwaring the words might have been taken almost as a proposal, had she so chosen, knowing what she knew, feeling what she felt, for his words came to her as a revelation, illuminating the recesses of her own unimaginative mind. Or if more were needed, the touch of her hand on his would have brought forth the words hovering on his lips, and which with the indecision of a weak mind, mingled with the generosity of an honourable one, he hesitated to say.

But, as we said before, Delicia had never acquired any of the delicate means that serve as stepping-stones between the two sexes, and if she had, would probably have scorned to make use of them.

So the opportunity was lost.

After that minute's silence, Mr Stevens turned round from the window, just too late to note the quick blush that had dyed Miss Mainwaring's cheek scarlet, and had as rapidly faded away; just too soon to hear the words that must have come had he stood there much longer with his back to her, and which, perhaps, might have gained him an insight of her feelings, no matter how guarded she might have been.

But it was not to be. He had turned round, and was standing within the circle of lamplight, looking just as he always did, only a little more harassed and troubled than usual, not alluding in the most distant way to the question he had so lately put to her.

She must have been mistaken, she concluded. Of course she had been. But really from the way he had spoken she imagined he was putting his own case, and that she herself had been the woman to whom he had alluded.

All this passed through her mind, mingled with much relief to think that she had not betrayed herself in any way. He was so odd, so different to any one else, that there was no accounting for anything he might say. Most likely the case had only occurred to him as a theoretical one, a problem, like many others he was fond of propounding, only, as

a rule, he was quicker with his answer than he had been to-day.

So when he held out his hand saying he must go, he had stayed much longer than he ought, seeing how late it had been when he arrived, she said, in addition to her "good-bye," she hoped his mental dilemmas would not necessitate his going to Fulham again, as the weather was too depressing for it to be healthy to take long, solitary walks. To which he agreed, saying that for the future he thought he should settle all his difficulties in full conclave, he having found the solitude of the last two days very bad for him. But she did not leave her hand in his a second longer than the strictest etiquette demanded, so he did not feel encouraged to add a word, or even a glance, that might have revealed his secret; and when he descended the staircase he was even more perplexed than when he had ascended it an hour ago.

"It is all of no good," he thought, as he went out into the foggy night. "She does not care, and her money makes me feel shy; but oh, what a feeling of rest and peace and strength she gives one!" And with this inward ejaculation he let himself, with a latch-key, into No 39.

CHAPTER III.

IF—

“It never yet did hurt
To lay down likelihoods and forms of hope.”

MEANTIME, whilst Cyril Stevens was hurrying home, and swaying in a weak, hesitating fashion between the idea of Delicia, wooed and won, and filling an imaginary home with a sense of rest and peace, and the other idea of Delicia lost to him for ever, even as a friend, by an abrupt declaration of love which she could not share, and would not accept—Delicia herself remained just as he had left her in the comfortable room with its bright firelight and lamplight, meditating over the words which had concluded their *tête-à-tête*.

By dint of recalling his words and tones as he stood in the window looking out into the darkening square, she began to feel convinced that he had meant something out of the common by that oracular sentence.

She was helped to this conclusion, no doubt, by the fact alluded to before, that his words had, as it

were, acted as a torch, lighting up the dim, dark corners of her own mind, and causing her to become aware of a secret of which she had been herself hitherto totally ignorant, but which had found, all unknown to herself, an abiding place there.

She had not permitted the torch to discover much, but had hastily turned her eyes away from what it might have to show, reserving all discoveries for a future time ; but now that she was alone, there was no further need for denying that which has been seen. No ; better to lift the veil that lay between herself and her heart, and find out what was this spectre that had shrunk away as if ashamed when the sudden light had startled it.

Delicia was no girl in her teens who had fancied herself in love so often that the imaginary could be mistaken for the real ; neither was she one who would determinately shut her eyes to the truth, softening down facts, and deceiving herself with such words as affection, friendship, &c. No ; with burning blushes she acknowledged to herself she was drifting—was it possible she had drifted?—into love with her friend !

But, despite her blushes, it was not shame she felt. She saw no cause for that, for the simple reason that in discovering her own secret she fancied she had discovered his. If this were indeed so, as she began to believe it might be, would not that account for the frequent visits, the hopes for the future, and attempts in the past, with which he had flooded her listening ears ? Even if, like herself, it had begun in all honest friendship, was it

not more than possible that on his side also it had drifted from that safe harbourage long ago, and was now launched in the sea of love? Well, granted she continued in her self-examination, if it were so, what stood between them? If such a declaration had indeed hovered on his lips this afternoon, what was it that had forced him to keep silence?

Such an idea as a half-hearted love, which hesitates even before stretching out a hand to gain what it wants, did not present itself to her. She was so single-hearted herself, so true, even if very unsentimental, that facts stood out clearly before her mental vision, the edges sharp and well defined, not shaded and softened until it is difficult to tell good from bad, wisdom from folly, as is the case with so many.

No; the first question to be answered was, "Did he love her?" and the second, "If so, wherefore did he hesitate to tell her so?" It was with a heart beating a little quicker than usual that, after some thought, she admitted to herself, helped to the knowledge, no doubt, by the feeling we all possess that those who interest us, those we love, must reciprocate the sentiment—must be interested in, must love us; a feeling, alas! that causes many of the sad mistakes the world is ever making. He had done much, said much, she decided, to lead her to suppose that he thought of her more highly than he did of other women, and what was that but love?

Now for the answer to the other question. What had hushed the words, if such words had been there, upon his lips?

"Her money," a voice seemed to reply; and to Delicia Mainwaring the answer seemed undoubtedly the probable one. For a woman of her nature was perfectly certain to accredit with the highest motives those whom she liked. She might be blinded through ignorance of the world, but she would never willingly set herself to worship a low ideal; and out of the depths of her own pure, loyal mind, would she judge of the actions of others.

So after an hour's reflection she rose up, feeling worried and perplexed perhaps, but yet, through it all, happy. He cared for her at any rate as a friend; and if as a lover—well, if later on it proved that it were so, then the spectre that must be hidden out of sight at present might venture forth and clothe itself with flesh and blood. And if not? Well, if such time never came, then either she had been mistaken, in which case the friendship would remain even if the love proved to have been only a dream; or if it were not so, and the love *was* there, only hidden away out of sight because he was too proud to take what he could not offer—well, it was a pride she could sympathise with, even whilst feeling it was mistaken.

From all which you will see Delicia Mainwaring was not a love-sick girl, willing to sacrifice everything to the fancied good of the minute; but neither was she a silly woman who would do nothing to help herself, thus tempting the arrows of an unpropitious fate, which you will see for yourself by observing her next act, which was to seat herself at a writing-table, and with pens, ink, and paper

before her, set herself to the composition of two letters. The first was the more difficult of the two, and took her some time to write, short as it was. Much thought was necessary between each sentence.

ANNE SQUARE.

DEAR MISS STEVENS,—I should like you to become acquainted with a young friend of mine, whom your brother saw here to-day. I daresay he may have mentioned her name to you, Miss Cicely Arbuthnot. If you and your sister would come over on Friday about five o'clock, I would ask her to meet you. If your brother could be persuaded to bring you I should be very glad to see him also, although I know "tea-parties," however small, are not in his way. I am afraid there is no use asking your mother?—Yours truly,

DELICIA MAINWARING.

10th November.

Miss Mainwaring folded this letter, sealed it, and then remained for some minutes buried in thought.

"Yes, that will do," she then said—for, like many people who live much alone, she had acquired a habit of speaking aloud to herself, more especially when perplexed or troubled. "First of all, the definite invitation will, I think, prevent his coming between this and Friday. That in itself will be a good thing, as perhaps it has not been wise seeing so very much of him as I have done lately. And then, if they come, as I think they are sure to do, I

shall see him with others, and be able to judge better how much reliance may be placed on his manner and words to me."

The second letter, with the invitation to Miss Arbuthnot, was soon written, and it was with a brighter countenance Delicia rang for the servant to take them to the post. A lonely dinner and a long solitary evening would be to most of us but a melancholy affair; but to Delicia, accustomed as she had been all her life more or less to solitude, that of itself did not weigh upon her spirits. Books and work caused the evening to pass only too quickly as a rule, but to-night it was very different.

She had undergone to-day a new experience, and all new experiences leave effects behind them, in the shape of fatigue, depression, excitement, or exhaustion, and thus it was with Delicia. A book could not interest her, because between the lines she read of a possible future; she was too restless even to sing or play; and even needlework, that refuge of anxious womanhood, was too calm, too monotonous an occupation to prove a satisfactory outlet for her feelings. Very early she gave up the pretence of doing anything, and drawing a chair up to the fire, in memory went over and over again the words and thoughts of this afternoon.

The calm Delicia was quite perturbed out of her usual quiet, for as is always the case, the blasting of a rock had caused a greater commotion than the perpetual shifting of a sand-bank. In a dreamy way she presently walked over to the window, and

drawing back the curtain, looked out into the dreary winter night, and then across to where the lights twinkled opposite in the windows of No. 39.

"If——" she said at length, and her lips softened as she spoke, and a tenderer, more womanly light shone in her eyes than was their wont. "If it is indeed THAT he means, then the crown of life that I have sometimes dreamed of is, after all, going to be given to me!" And an hour later, as she walked up the old-fashioned staircase, candle in hand, with smoke-grimed portraits staring down upon her from the walls, there, once again, she repeated to herself, "If——" dreamily, softly; once again her eyes grew tender and her lips parted into a smile.

And the old city merchant, beneath whose portrait she had paused and uttered the significant little word, seemed, in the flickering light of the candle she held, to smile in contempt at the woman who could make herself happy, even for one hour, on an "if," when the "if" was subject to a man's caprice.

CHAPTER IV.

MIEUX ÊTRE QUE PARAÎTRE.

“ Ah me, my friend ! There is no perfect friend.”

DELICIA’S surmises in both cases proved correct. Her invitation for Friday was accepted, and there were no visits on the intervening days. The said days, passed all alone, had seemed rather long, and the dreary November weather drearier than ever ; but they were over now, and Delicia Mainwaring, in a delicate silver-grey dress with ruffles of lace about it, and a small bunch of ferns under her round, white chin, is seated in her drawing-room, a book in her hand, awaiting the advent of her visitors.

So much for the interior of No. 1 Anne Square ; now for No. 39.

“ Betty, may I ask when you are going to dress for Miss Mainwaring’s tea ? Do you know that it is half-past four now ? ”

The girl who spoke had a bright, sunshiny face with blue eyes, which looked as if they could, on occasion, twinkle with fun ; the girl whom she

stood over and addressed was leaning back in an old arm-chair, drawn up as close as possible to the window, in order to catch the last gleam of daylight upon the book she held.

She put down her volume when her sister spoke, and looked up, and dusk as it has grown, there is still light enough, I think, to sketch her portrait.

"A portrait for which few words will suffice," I am afraid I hear you say; and those words, "Plain to ugliness." But wait; do not be too hasty in your judgment, for I believe you will live to change it. The outline of her face is like her brother's, thin almost to the point of being haggard, and that in itself is a drawback to a girl, to whom roundness of form and pretty colouring are generally sufficient to cause her to be spoken of as a beauty. And Miss Stevens' complexion is of as pale an olive as a Southerner's, with not a tinge of colour to relieve it; and the eyes, which should give fire and life to such a face, are in her case hidden behind spectacles—blue spectacles! To many this will, I am sure, be the last straw. Expect us to admire a woman—a young woman too—who wears blue spectacles? It is a moral impossibility.

All I can say is, that to many who knew her they did not prove an insurmountable obstacle; indeed in some cases they exerted a species of fascination.

But before the light quite fades let us just glance at her good points, for to say nothing more than we have done would be describing her in the form of

an old-fashioned *silhouette* portrait, which did indeed give a faithful outline of the original, but left out everything which made of that original a thing of beauty.

Her figure, then, even if too slight to please every one, is so graceful, that in the eyes of many it leaves nothing to be desired; and now notice how well she carries that small head, with its smooth, black hair; and do not overlook the slight white hand resting on her book. And if you are one to whom superiority, refinement in any form, appeals, look at the mouth, which is the feature where character is most clearly written; for, as the proverb has it, "God made our eyes and noses, but we make our own mouths:" well, look at the mouth with its delicate curves and the dimples all about it, and acknowledge that it makes up for many deficiencies of mere colouring.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Stevens, rousing herself, and looking critically first at her sister's neat toilet and then at her own crumpled dress; "dear me, how smart you are! Is that extra burden to be laid upon us as well as making acquaintance with my 'pleasant young friend'?"

"Now Betty, do not scoff, for I am sure that letter took a long time composing. Such intense primness and dulness could never have flowed out of any one's mind spontaneously."

"You are mistaken: 'The Polite Letter-writer,' my dear Nan, is answerable for that epistle, I feel sure. 'A less formal invitation than the preceding' was the title of it, if you care for any further

particulars. But you mistake me altogether when you accuse me of scoffing. Perish the thought! Far from scoffing, I admire, what I fear I shall never be able to imitate."

"Pray do not waste any more time in talking nonsense or we shall be too late to go at all. Instead, come up and get your bonnet; I will go with you or you will be certain to forget something, and really we ought to hurry."

"My dear, restrain that little bitter tongue of yours, and tell me, does our dear, love-lorn brother accompany us?"

"No, he will meet us there. And that reminds me, Betty, I want to say something to you on that subject; but I will wait till I am certain no one can overhear us."

"I am all ears, as I believe some writer of repute has said before me."

"Nan said nothing in reply—nothing more until the door of their room was safely shut behind the two girls, and then, "Listen, Betty," she began; "you must promise me that you will behave properly over there to-night," pointing across the Square as she spoke.

"Nan, you alarm me! What am I likely to do? Have I hitherto been in the habit of betraying my plebeian origin by my behaviour when at 'tea-parties'—as Delicia has it? Tell me," she went on in would-be anxious tones, "what do I do? Do I drink my tea out of a saucer, or do I take too much cake? Yes," meditatively, "I fear I often do take twice when perhaps I am offered it as a mere

matter of form. But, indeed," clasping her hands, "it is not from greediness, I assure you ; it is much more often because when eating one is not expected to talk."

"No, Betty, I am not going to laugh, however much you may strive to be witty, so you may as well go on buttoning your boots and leave off acting. You know quite well what I mean: you must not be amused to-night—no, you must not even *seem* to be amused at anything you may see."

"And *pourquoi* ?"

"Because—oh, because we must not annoy our *vis-à-vis* ; and there is nothing people hate so much as to imagine they have afforded the least amusement to any one else ; and the more stupid they are, as a rule, the more they hate it."

"She speaks like a book," ejaculated Miss Stevens.

"Seriously, Betty, you know yourself that no one is as detested as a sarcastic woman."

"Except a prig."

"No, you cannot accuse *me* of being a prig. You know—who better?—what I am at home, where, of course, we may behave as fiendishly as we please" (a curious creed, we may observe *en passant*) ; "but when I go out, then——"

"Yes, then—spare me the rest, dear," cried Betty. "Do not I know it only too well! And by the by, what would Samuel say if he could have heard that last speech, 'When I am at home, of course I may behave as fiendishly as I please' ?"

In imagination I overhear some one repeating it to him, and then I see an averted face, and two delicate white hands clasped appealingly"—lifting her own as she spoke—"and a voice exclaiming, every other word in italics: 'Oh, don't say so! You are taking away my belief in all womankind! If I may not trust those calm blue eyes, what do you leave me to pin my faith to in this black, treacherous world?'"

"Now hush, Betty; you are only talking all this nonsense to try and prevent me saying what I have come here to say."

"Well, go on; I am listening. What is it I am not to do?"

"You know just as well as I do what I mean. That you must not appear to notice any love-making or flirtation, or whatever they choose to call it, in any way, however vague, because even if Miss Mainwaring did not understand you, Cyril would; and it would never do to vex him, for I verily believe he is in earnest; and Delicia, as any one can see, is not one to comprehend a joke, however small; so mind now, you are a model of discretion."

"Right you are, Nan; and I promise you I will behave as discreetly as a village schoolmistress—indeed I think I shall rather look the character in this bonnet, and with my spectacles on; and I shall withdraw into the background and drink my tea, and talk to the 'young friend,' whilst gazing with a totally unmoved countenance at any gambols that the young around me may indulge in."

"Well, I hope you will not forget your promise when you are there, for, you know, it would be a shame to spoil Cyril's chance, if he really is in love with the girl. It is our duty to do the best we can for him."

"And as in my case doing the best for him seems to consist in seeing as little as I can, I promise, in token of my wish to be amiable, to take off my glasses if anything occurs which threatens to get on my nerves, so, as the divine William observes, 'Not to seek for sorrow with my spectacles!' Now come; I am sure it is time we started, and I feel at present attuned to a suitable state of mind to witness with calmness Platonic affection, or even *bond fide* love-making."

"Then please do not waste a minnte, if you are in such an agreeable frame of mind, but let us start at once."

And as the hall-door closed behind them, "What a comfort Miss Mainwaring's sisters-in-law will be to her!"

"Poor thing," said Betty, feelingly, "I really do not know for which I pity her most—having Cyril for a husband, or us for sisters!"

They crossed the Square in silence, and it was not till she stood on the step of No. 1, with her hand on the bell, that Betty spoke again, this time in the form of an "aside," given over the area railings. "I wonder whether to the listening but disinterested ears of our brother has been borne the intelligence that the fair Delicia carries a money-bag in either shapely hand!"

As the door was opened at that moment, no reply was possible, if such reply had been expected.

There was something in the aspect of Miss Mainwaring's drawing-room, with its sober, old-fashioned furniture, and of Delicia herself, quiet and self-possessed, which precluded the possibility of any unseemly laughter; and even Elizabeth Stevens, to give her the full benefit of her name, felt herself as much awed as it was possible for her to be.

"So much was I impressed by the gravity and propriety of my surroundings," she afterwards confided to Nan, "that I distinctly recall, on being presented to the pleasant young friend, wishing I had changed my dress."

But notwithstanding the primness, it was undeniably a pleasant room, especially in dull November weather; and as they all had youth in common, if nothing else, they were soon talking cheerfully enough over their tea.

They formed a curious study of contrast these four girls: Delicia, at six-and-twenty, taking her first little peep into the great world, and still interested in, and excited by, everything she saw there; Cicely Arbuthnot, at nineteen, neither interested in nor excited by anything, so long as it did not affect her own small personal concerns; and the two Miss Stevens's, who had seen more, done more, learnt more in three months of their changeful existence than either of the others in three years of theirs. For it is only those who have known the bitterness of poverty as well as the comfort of plenty, that can be said to have had a

wide experience of life. And Mr Stevens had not lived all his life in Anne Square; and even now, to keep that roof over the head of his many children, and to provide the necessary bread and butter for their many mouths, was not always an easy matter. But notwithstanding the different habits and natures of these four young women, they were soon all chattering pleasantly enough over their tea and cake.

When the bell rang there was a slight pause in the conversation, and they all, as the door was opened in a nervous, hesitating manner, that one of the party knew so well, glanced up with some interest at the man whose entrance affected them all in a different way.

He came in pushing his hair off his forehead in the way that was habitual to him when not quite at his ease—and surely it was enough to make any man shy to find six eyes and a pair of blue spectacles fastened upon him. Cyril Stevens, however, was not nervous, save on very rare occasions, and even then he never betrayed himself by any outward awkwardness.

He shook hands with his hostess, was introduced to Miss Arbuthnot, and then somehow the little group givided—the three girls falling back—thus leaving the tea-table to Miss Mainwaring and the new-comer.

“It is a delightful room, don’t you think so? So different to every one else’s!” said Miss Arbuthnot, in a slightly sentimental tone, as she leant back in the velvet arm-chair which made such a pretty

background for her bright head. "It is always a rest to me to come here, for ours is such a noisy house;" with a sigh, "there are so many children!"

"How many?" questioned Miss Stevens.

"Five at home, and two boys at school."

"Well, you would have to come to our house to understand what the words 'noise' and 'confusion' mean, for we are twelve. And not quiet, model children, any of us, I can assure you, except in one sense."

"And what is that sense?"

"Models for father. He is an artist, you may perhaps have heard, and he is always drawing some of us. It is cheap, you see; and then some of them are always at hand."

"Sometimes," interposed Betty, "I fancy that, notwithstanding the economy, he has almost been led to wish there were not quite so many always close at hand."

"Are you sitting for anything now?" questioned Miss Arbuthnot, who was interested in these girls, who lived a life so unlike her own.

"No," replied Nan, "we are not; but five of the young ones are posing as Spanish beggars, and every morning it is Betty's and my pleasing duty to take off their ordinary garments, dress them in artistic rags, black their faces, hands, and bare feet, rumple their hair; and then in that forlorn estate they all five have to sit huddled up on the floor, making a shallow pretence that they are playing at cards. Playing, indeed! it is poor playing to them."

Miss Arbuthnot laughed. "Why? Do they not like it?"

"Not at all. For the first hour, perhaps, they do not mind much; but as nothing ever teaches father to leave off after that first hour, they are generally brought away one by one, screaming with temper, by the boy who cleans the studio."

"And what does your mother say when they are so ill used, poor little things?"

"Mother! Dear me, if you knew mother you would never cease wondering why she had been selected to be the mother of twelve! 'Dear me, children,' looking sweetly up from a stocking she is darning—for she is always usefully employed, though the results are insignificant—'why are you crying? Oh, dinner-time, is it? Well, never mind; here is some chocolate.' That is the way we have all been brought up, and yet we are all alive and hearty."

Nan spoke a little nervously, her eyes fixed upon Betty, who, after looking at her sister for a moment as if to make quite sure that she was observed, took off her spectacles and put them away in the case that hung to her *châtelaine*. There was something in the way she did it that made her meaning so evident, that Nan involuntarily glanced across the room—and certainly the two heads bending over the tea-table were rather close together, and the voices had sunk rather lower than usual.

Betty's eyes twinkled as they followed her sister's; and what eyes they were, now that the spectacles were not there to hide them! They were no ordi-

nary soft, dark eyes, beautiful in their colouring, like her brother's—they were even a little too small to be perfect ; but the expression, the life in them was wonderful. They were a little deep set, which made them look darker than they really were, and in Elizabeth Stevens' pale face they shone black as night.

Nan did not make any remark after that inquiring look round the room, only glanced appealingly towards her sister, and then talked all the faster to Miss Arbuthnot.

But Betty, in a quiet, unostentatious manner, glanced every now and then towards the tea-table. She had not forgotten her promise to Nan. Had she not, in token of her intention to keep good faith, just put away her glasses so as to see as little as possible—and very little it was she saw without them, for she was, honestly, very short-sighted ; but she had noticed the lowered voices, and how the conversation had parted into two streams since the arrival of the latest guest. And very quick to note such things was Miss Elizabeth Stevens.

But if she could have overheard the conversation that had grown so low, I think she would have been disappointed. Delicia was not quite at her ease, and was consequently less perfect in Cyril's eyes than usual ; her calmness being one of her principal charms, and his usual style of conversation being put out of the question by the possibility of listeners, he was not able to make himself nearly so comfortably at home as usual.

He did, indeed, lower his voice over that second

cup of tea, and murmur that he had not repeated his walk to Fulham; whereat Delicia blushed slightly, which, in an unreasoning manner, annoyed him. Then he went on further to say that he had missed his afternoon talk with his *friend*—a gentle stress upon the word—and that he hoped he was not going to be put on one side, and asked by special invitation again, as he liked the old way best.

And poor, foolish Delicia smiled, and was pleased that he should thus prefer to come when she was alone; and yet, withal, was not satisfied, but felt that something had gone out of this day's talk which had been in it last Monday.

Then the teacups were put down, and she turned to say a word to Nan Stevens, and every one moved a little, and Mr Stevens found himself in his favourite arm-chair, talking to St Cecilia.

This conversation did not drag. There was a delicate flavour of flirtation about it which helped it along—nothing coarse, you understand, but a delicate flavour, such as all Miss Arbuthnot's conversations with men were tinged with. And, as a rule, she found the key to men's interests, if not to their hearts, quickly enough.

And Cyril Stevens proved no exception to the rule.

"I have seen you before," he said, "and I am so glad to make your acquaintance. I have wished to do so ever since one evening when I saw you here, though you little knew I was looking at you."

Miss Arbuthnot did not deny the fact, only raised her pretty eyes, and said with a little uplifting of

the eyebrows, "What a good memory you must have! I envy you the gift. Now I never can recall a face."

"There are faces one does not *care* to recall; and there are others," said Cyril, and then paused, leaving the unfinished sentence to speak for itself.

Cicely coloured a little. "Of course, as you are an artist, you observe faces, and I daresay see more in them than is visible to our everyday eyes."

"Yes, I daresay it is so. Shall I tell you what I saw in yours, and how I had a fancy to paint you? Seated at an organ, all in white, with the light from a coloured window falling across you: it would make a pretty picture: will you sit to me for it?" he said suddenly, leaning forward as he spoke.

"I should like it, but I must ask papa first. What a glorious life an artist's must be!" she went on, looking up admiringly at him; and her upraised glances were pleasant flattery—not the sweet, delicate flattery of Delicia's attentive eyes, *bien entendu*, but agreeable in its way for all that.

"Art gives its followers something to think of always that takes them out of the troubles and cares of life, does it not?" she asked.

Here was a *cheval de bataille* Mr Stevens was always ready to mount at a minute's notice. "Yes," he said softly; "if it were not for art, life would be a lesson terribly hard to learn. But why should you say such a thing? Young and happy as you are, surely *you* do not find life hard?"

"Happy! Ah, that shows that you only judge by appearances! To you, I daresay, my troubles

would appear so small and slight as scarcely to be worthy of the name ; but then you are a strong man who can do as you will, and I must just stay at home and bear, which is far, far harder."

There were tears in her voice, and doubtless she believed as she spoke that her horizon was black with clouds. "I think," she continued after a second's silence, "that if one never cared for anybody, one would be happier ; don't you agree with me ?"

"Yes ; for we nearly always love the wrong people."

"Love-stories always go wrong somehow," she said, glancing up, "otherwise romances would be dull, people say ; but for those who act the romances, it seems hard, does it not ?"

Soft sympathy crept into Cyril's eyes, brought there partly by the belief that he also knew the meaning of a sorrowful heart, and partly by the general halo of melancholy with which Miss Arbuthnot could encircle herself when speaking of herself. Not that her intention was willingly to mislead, for, strange to say, she deceived herself as much as any one else, and really believed she was the heroine of a tragedy as sad as any to be read of in books.

"Avoid Love is the moral of most romances," said Mr Stevens, "and I think it is my advice also. Like every one, or you make enemies ; love none, for you will live to repent it."

"No, I cannot let that sentiment pass," here suddenly interposed Delicia's voice. It was in vain

she had tried to interest herself in the conversation of Miss Stevens and her sister. Her eyes would wander to the two on the other side of the room, and her ears would strain themselves to catch that conversation which evidently was of so interesting a nature.

And when at length she interposed that little sentence, thus proving to the two girls how far her mind had been from them and their sayings, Betty did not smile, which showed she was not one who would mercilessly jest both in and out of season. No, she did not smile, and there was even a shade of pity in her eyes as she looked from Delicia's fair flushed face to the two talkers opposite. And it was she who backed Delicia up, and quoted—

“If we are far from those that we love,
We have but to make love to those that are near ;”

observing that the poet made no allusion to likes, but evidently inferred that let who might be the object, Love was always desirable.

Mr Stevens rose when Delicia spoke, with an expression on his face as if he had not quite liked the interruption. There was a decided frown at his sister's argument as deduced from the poet. It is never pleasant, when we have been indulging in a sentimental *tête-à-tête*, to find that our conversation has been overheard, and least of all by the person with whom we are generally in the habit of indulging in a *tête-à-tête*.

“I think it is time for me to say good night,

Miss Mainwaring," he said, a little stiffly, holding out his hand. "I must go, I am afraid."

"In which case I think we had better depart too, Nan, for I see it is getting late; and as Cyril does not offer to see us home, I suppose we must reverse the case, and offer to escort him."

But whilst she was still speaking, a servant came to announce that Miss Arbuthnot's carriage was at the door.

"Good-bye," said Delicia to her, and she kissed her quietly; "you must come back another evening." And then, not without a slight gleam in her eyes, she added, "Has Mr Rayton returned to town yet?"

But Cicely was making her adieux to the Stevens's and did not hear, or at any rate did not answer, so Delicia turned to Mr Stevens and asked him if he would kindly see Miss Arbuthnot to her carriage.

Mr Stevens would be so kind; and with many pretty words and gestures Miss Arbuthnot took her departure.

"You must not grieve too much over your troubles," said Mr Stevens, gently, almost tenderly, as he put her into her carriage; and the idea of anything grieving overmuch the blooming girl before him, did not seem in the least ludicrous or incongruous, as it might have done to some.

"No, I will remember your kind words," she said, with a sweet look in her pretty eyes, "and be brave, and perhaps things will yet come right;" then bowing and smiling, drove off into the darkness.

When Mr Stevens turned round, his sisters were standing ready cloaked in the hall.

"One minute: I must say good night to Miss Mainwaring, and he ran up-stairs again.

"I have come back," he said, crossing the room to where Delicia stood all alone by the fire, "to say good-bye to you."

She held out her hand.

"Good-bye," he said, holding it a minute in his own. "It has been a disappointing evening, has it not? I think we get on better when there is no party. You must let me come again when there is no one to interrupt us, and we can talk as much as ever we like."

"Good night," she said, gently. "Come again, yes, just as often as you like. I am always glad to see you."

He said nothing more, but turned and walked down-stairs slowly, with a little line of perplexity on his smooth forehead; and it was also in utter silence that the three commenced to cross the Square.

But it was not Elizabeth's intention that nothing should be said about the last hour's amusement.

"That Miss Arbuthnot is very pretty, Cyril," she began. "I wonder you never mentioned her at home."

"I never spoke to her until to-night."

"She seemed to have a good deal to say for herself."

"Yes; I took a great fancy to her the first time I saw her—there is so much in her face. She is

evidently an interesting sort of a girl—unlike the usual run—has ideas beyond dress and dancing—seems to know something too about art. Is fond of it, at any rate.”

“Yes, evidently artful, I should say—very artful!”

“That was not at all a successful sneer, my dear Betty.”

“If you recognised it as a sneer, my brother, you must allow me to differ from you.”

From which speech we may infer, as Betty was very seldom betrayed into a disagreeable speech to her own family, that she was not altogether satisfied with the conduct of Mr Cyril Stevens.

CHAPTER V.

SO VERY WILFUL.

"Youth ! youth ! how buoyant are thy hopes ! They turn
Like marigolds toward the sunny side."

THE drawing-room of 15 Bute Street, Eaton Square, was very different to that of 1 Anne Square. Quite as unlike, in its way, as Cicely Arbuthnot's life was unlike Delicia's. But to know people, it is always allowed, we must see them at home, so, as I do not wish Cicely Arbuthnot, with her little affectations and foolish pretences of a broken heart, to be quite discarded from your affections, but to be borne with patiently, and perhaps pitied a little for her folly, until a few added years, and the experience they bring, shall have taught their lesson, we will follow her home, and in a lenient, not too critical spirit, watch her for another hour or two in the drawing-room of 15 Bute Street, with its artistic furniture, olive-green walls, and plates and dishes of rare and wondrous patterns hung thereon, determined that whatever we may observe to laugh at or to despise, to bear with it notwithstanding, for the sake of those nineteen years.

Something for the sake of her beauty, also, surely.

So at least her father thinks as he enters the room where she sits awaiting him, the olive walls forming a pretty background for the young figure in white, a smile of welcome on her face. For these two are very fond of each other, and I think old Mr Arbuthnot feels a pang at his heart every time her beauty particularly strikes him, and he is led thereby to wonder how long it will be before some one else discovers the fact also, and wins her for his own, leaving him all alone to pass his evenings in his empty rooms as best he may. But such time has not, and is not likely to come yet, for Mr Arbuthnot, with a want of perception of things about him common to many fathers, firmly believes that, so far, no one has ever touched his daughter's fancy, let alone her heart.

"How pleasant it is, papa," rising on his entrance, "to find ourselves alone again! Jessie is rather a drawback to our evenings, is she not?"

"That is very unkind," said Mr Arbuthnot, but he did not speak as if he were displeased, and he smoothed back the hair from his daughter's forehead as he spoke. "She is a good girl too; but we have been so long alone together, you and I, that we have learnt to find out the best of one another." And he sighed, remembering the time when the mother of this girl had stood before him, bright, loving, and impetuous as her daughter was now, and of the empty place she had so long left that daughter to fill as best she might. But what

daughter, however dear, can quite fill the place of the one who has known and shared the troubles as well as the joys of life?

"Well, dear, as Jessie is out—enjoying herself, let us hope—let me, whilst we are at dinner, hear what you have been doing this afternoon."

"Oh, it has been very pleasant. The Stevens's were there, you know—those artists who live opposite to Delicia, whom I have so often wished to meet. Queer people, I should think, particularly the women; but the son was very agreeable."

"And Delicia?"

"Oh, as sweet as ever. Dear Delicia! I must try and persuade her to dine here one evening, for I know you would like her; and, papa——"

"Well?"

"Would you mind my sitting to Mr Stevens for my picture?"

"To the father or the son?" questioned Mr Arbuthnot, smiling.

"The son, of course, it was who asked me. I have never seen the father."

"And what sort of a bill will the gentleman send in for the picture when it is completed?"

"Oh, it will not be a portrait; it is only a fancy picture. Do, papa, say 'yes,' for I should so like it."

"But, my dear, we do not know these people."

"Delicia's friends, papa!" said Cicely, in a grieved voice. "You know how particular she is. Of course I must call on Mrs Stevens first; but afterwards, if he says anything more about it, there could be no harm, could there?"

"Very well, dear ; just as you like. No, certainly, as you say, there is not much harm in it."

From which conversation you will see at once that Cicely, being a diplomatist in her own way, had gained two points : permission to call on Mrs Stevens ; and further, should Fate so decree it, to have her picture painted by Mr Cyril Stevens. In this house it was not difficult to see who was master ; but perhaps this was an exceptional night, Miss Jessie Arbuthnot being out of the way.

"And now tell me, papa," said Cicely, coaxingly, drawing her chair close up to her father's side directly dinner was over, "what you have been doing all day, where you have been, who you have seen, and all the rest of it."

"Been, done, seen—you ask me so many questions that you puzzle me. But I know you well enough to understand that you are interested in the movements and sayings only of certain of my friends. Let me think. By the by I have something to tell you : Philip Rayton is going back to India."

"Going where?" And there was no doubt as to whether Cicely was interested or not, for whereas hitherto she had been lazily cracking her nuts, and only occasionally leaning forward to talk to her father, now she dropped walnuts and crackers alike, and sat quite upright, with anxious eyes turned full upon her father's face.

"To India, dear ; and a very good thing too, I think, for he is so very much in earnest that he is sure to succeed : he likes the climate, and is, I

believe, doing very well out there,—all so many good reasons why he should return.”

“But, papa, why should he go to that horrible place, so far away from all his friends? Is he very poor?” she asked, after a pause.

“Yes, so I believe; and for a poor man England is not the best place.”

“Do you know why he came home at all, if, as you say, he was doing so well in India?” she questioned, a little bitterly.

“Business,” he says, “and that he never meant to stay more than a year. My belief is that he came to try and beguile an heiress to bestow herself and her fortune upon him, for the sake of his *beaux yeux*; and having failed in that, that he is now going back to endeavour to earn a fortune in a more legitimate way.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I only think so because it seems so very probable. He is poor and good-looking, and not so young as he was, therefore all the more likely to be tired of India and hard work, and ready to settle down in England, if only some one were to turn up with sufficient pocket-money to keep the household going. That is the state of the case, you may depend upon it, my dear,” concluded Mr Arbuthnot, as confidently as if the genus “Fortune-hunter” had been the object of his careful study ever since his youth, and that he was consequently too much on the look-out to be deceived by any one; instead of, as was the case, being a most unwary old gentleman, who was for ever being

beguiled by every species of deceiver, from the gentleman who called for a subscription, with a large book wherein to write your name and amount contributed, to the one-armed beggar with a dilapidated coat and the amputated arm safely and warmly hidden away beneath it, and the woman by his side holding a borrowed baby under a tattered shawl, and pricking its bare legs with a pin to make it scream. An unwary old gentleman, to whom, if the fortune-hunter had appeared at 15 Bute Street, he would have given his daughter, being quite convinced of nobility of purpose and trustworthy intentions.

Miss Arbuthnot did not speak again for a minute or two, neither did she eat any more nuts; but instead, sat with hands tightly clasped together, thinking.

"Papa," at length she said, "if a man were poor, and did not like, for that reason, to ask a girl to marry him just because he thought she was well off, it would be very sad, would it not?"

"Sad, but highly improbable."

"But it might happen," she gently persisted; "there are some such men, I suppose."

"They are so rare, my dear, that I think we need scarcely trouble ourselves by imagining we are likely to come across them," said Mr Arbuthnot, who was not clever at applying speculative cases to actual life.

"But, papa—— No, you are laughing, and surely it is no laughing matter! Why," rising as she spoke, and laying her hand on his shoulder,

"fancy *money* being the means of spoiling two people's whole lives," and her voice broke into something that was very like a sob.

"Not the money, my dear, but the want of it. And all I can say is, that if the man were really, as you say, in love, and knew that he had not the wherewithal to provide the necessities of life for himself, let alone for others, then the best thing would be for him to take himself off out of the way of temptation."

"But the woman, papa, who cannot go away, but must just remain on, with nothing to do but to think about him?"

"The less she thinks about him, except to congratulate herself on the escape she has had, the better. Depend upon it, if she had married him, she would soon have wished the time had to come over again." But Cicely shook her foolish young head incredulously.

"But if the woman had money, papa—ever so little, but enough to make all the difference, perhaps?"

"Then, ah then, the case of course would be different, though I for one do not approve of any man living on his wife. Bad for him, and worse for her; but there, we have said enough on the subject. Come up-stairs and sing to me instead."

Cicely gave her head an impatient toss, but she said no more, as she turned towards the door.

Mr Arbuthnot, who was old, and rather blind, did not observe the tears shining like brilliants in his daughter's pretty eyes, nor the pink flush upon

her cheeks, nor even the little toss of the head. She paused at the head of the stairs for him, he not being as active as he had been; and when he reached her side, he laid his hand caressingly on her hair, which showed the streaks of gold in it, shining in the lamplight, as on that first evening when Cyril Stevens had seen and admired it. "When the time comes for you to have a lover, dear one, this is the gold he will be in search of, will it not, and no thoughts of how much money there is to gild it? This, and your bright eyes, will be sufficient fortune for him."

"Yes, papa," Cicely replied; but it was a little difficult for her to steady her voice. "Yes, I wish I were quite poor, so that I might be sure it was only for myself I was loved!" which was a harmlessly affected little speech, for no one appreciated herself more highly than did Miss Cicely Arbuthnot, or less imagined the *beaux yeux de sa casquette* might prove dangerous rivals to her own pretty eyes and rippling hair.

It was not fated, however, that Miss Arbuthnot should finish her little speech in peace, spite of its harmlessness.

"Cicely pausing on the stairs to talk sentimentalities with no other audience than pa!" cried a quick voice behind; and the two turned to see a tall figure running up after them, in sweeping white muslin—a tall girl's figure, with bright cheeks, bright hair, bright eyes—in fact, everything about her telling of youth and happiness and boisterous health.

"Jessie, take care ; you are treading on my dress ! Oh, how rough you are ! And what have you come home so early for ?"

"Dear pa, now, is that a kind way to welcome me ? You are glad to see me, are you not ? at least you are not so nasty about it as that spoilt girl," pointing in the direction of the tall white figure that was sweeping slowly up the next flight of stairs. "But you are a dear old pa, who is never cross, so if you come into the drawing-room I will tell you how I have been enjoying myself."

Perhaps if Jessie had known how the heart under that white bodice was throbbing with pain and disappointment, and how the tears were standing in those aching eyes, she would not have looked so vindictively after the slight young figure ; for Jessie was not at all a bad person, only young and selfish and thoughtless.

"Cross old patch ! I do believe she is going to bed ! Never mind, pa, you have one daughter who is not sulky ; so come in and I will talk to you."

And quite carried away by her impetuosity, old Mr Arbuthnot suffered himself to be led into the drawing-room, saying feebly, "Hush, dear ! hush ! you should not speak like that about your sister." And whilst he spoke, felt more and more strongly how sad it was that there was no mother to gather the good that lay in these two hearts, and show to the one what was worth finding in the other.

Meanwhile, up-stairs Cicely, with hot and bitter thoughts surging within her, was walking up and down her room. "Going to India," were the only

words she could recall of her late conversation ; but they served to madden her. For hers was an ill-regulated mind, all unaccustomed to checks or disasters along life's road, and that what *she* desired was not to be—was something which seemed impossible to understand.

And with all her youthful impetuosity she believed at present that the whole possibility of future happiness for her lay in the possession of Philip Rayton's love.

"And he does love me," she kept repeating to herself ; "he does love me, I know it ! But he is poor and I am rich, and that is what is standing between us ! And my life will be wretched and spoilt because of his absurd scruples ! O Philip, Philip !" and with tears coursing down her cheeks she leant against the window, gazing out into the dreary, starless night, between her sobs murmuring, "It shall not be ! it must not be !"

Here Jessie found her later on, when she looked in for a moment on her way to bed. "Good night, Cicely,—got over the sulks ? Well, whether you have or not, I must tell you who was at the Whites —Philip Rayton—there ! And he was so civil to me that all the other girls were jealous ; and he told me—I wish the candles were lit, because I really should like to see your face !—he told me that he was going back to India."

No answer.

"Well, are you not sorry now you were so cross when the invitation came, and that you made me go because you thought it was a child's party ?

Never mind ; I forgive you, because I have enjoyed it so."

And then, feeling her way to where she could see her sister's figure defined against the window, "Good night," she said, stooping—for she was the taller of the two—and kissing the soft cheek—"good night;" and as Cicely returned the kiss gently, "Now, as you are evidently in a more forgiving mood, I will tell you something to cheer you."

"What?" said Cicely, speaking for the first time, and turning her head round from the window.

"He said I was to tell you he was leaving town to-morrow afternoon, so he should call here in the morning, in the hopes of seeing you to say 'good-bye.' Also, he said—shall I tell you? yes, I will, because you have not snapped once since I came in—that he hoped I should be at my music lesson—not, perhaps, in so many words, but inferred it; so you see, Cicely, after all, there is no cause to be jealous of me." And with a sweeping curtsey Jessie retired.

When Jessie was in her first sleep that night, she was awakened by a soft kiss upon her forehead. "I have come to say 'good night,'" said Miss Arbuthnot, apologetically, as her sister started up in alarm. "I do not think I kissed you before; and I am sorry, Jessie, I was so cross."

"Ah yes, I remember," murmured Jessie, sleepily, "you were cross; but it is all right, you know—there is no need to be jealous of me."

CHAPTER VI.

DAY-DREAMS.

"To love or hate, to win or lose."

"You look ill, Cis," said her father, as they sat down to breakfast the following morning; "I am afraid you have not slept well?"

"Oh, pa!" cried Jessie, reproachfully, "how could you expect her to sleep well when you know that Mr Rayton is coming this morning to say 'good-bye'?"

Mr Arbuthnot's questioning voice was drowned in Miss Heaton's reproving, "Jessie, that is not the way to speak!" and Cicely's angry, "Jessie, how pert you are! I have a headache," she went on, addressing herself to her father, who, in the silence that ensued, asked again, "When is Mr Rayton coming?"

"This morning, father. He sent a message by Jessie that he was leaving town this afternoon, and that he would look in about twelve o'clock, on the chance of seeing us, to say 'good-bye.'"

Her lips quivered a little as she spoke; but the

hope that her sister's words had brought to her the previous evening still shone clearly in her dark eyes.

"Ask him to stay to lunch, Cicely, and I will come back so as to see him also."

"Yes, I will ask him."

"I can call spirits from the vasty deep. So can I," quoted Jessie; "but will they come when they are called?"

Cicely flushed angrily, but she said nothing, as a war of words with Jessie was not always attended with success. Later on, when Mr Arbuthnot and Miss Heaton had gone, leaving the girls alone, Jessie came nearer to her sister's side. "Don't be cross, Cis," she said; "for, see, I am going to be so good-natured. As I am grown-up, of course I might sit in the morning-room with you, might I not?"

"I cannot prevent you," replied Cicely, coldly; and then, after a second's pause, "Why should I wish to do so?"

"No, why should you?" echoed Jessie. "But anyhow, fond as you are of having me about you, I daresay you will get on if I am absent for one morning; so I will not give you three long hours of anxiety as to where I shall be at twelve o'clock, but tell you at once that after my music-lesson, which is over at half-past one, I am going out to lunch with the Elliots. Now, is not that a joyful surprise?"

Cicely's eyes did brighten—there is no denying it

—but all the same she felt a little uncomfortable at being glad.

“Don’t, Jessie,” she said, laying her hand on her sister’s arm—“don’t speak like that. You must try not to be so aggravating, Jessie, because you really mean to be kind, do you not?”

“Yes, I will try,” said Jessie, “but——”

She did not finish her sentence, but departed whistling, an unlady-like proceeding which caused her sister’s forehead to contract into a frown.

The “but” which had concluded Jessie’s sentence did not spin itself out into an excuse for that sister’s behaviour, as it might have done, in Cicely Arbuthnot’s heart, as, her household occupations over, she betook herself to the morning-room, fancy-work in hand, to while away the time that must yet elapse before Mr Rayton could arrive. No; on the contrary, she felt rather the virtuous sensation of having given a reproof where it was necessary—gently, and in a manner most soothing to the young sinner, but yet so that neither the sin nor the reproof had been made light of. She did not put many stitches into her work that morning, notwithstanding the preparations she had made, for her thoughts were anxious, although through them a bright hope kept shining,—a hope which tinged even the dull street and grey clouds above with sunlight—a sunlight not much of which was owing to the chill November morning.

“If he had sent that message,” so her thoughts ran—“if he thought of her sufficiently to wish to say ‘good-bye’ to her—if he wished to see her alone

—there was surely small difficulty in guessing the words he was coming to say.” The words that she longed to hear might indeed be kept back by those scruples which sway a generous soul, and prevent it from caring to wed its poverty to a woman’s wealth; but a hint would prove sufficient for her.

“It shall not be!” she whispered to herself; and with sudden energy she took up her work and sewed diligently for some minutes, and then once again realities grew distasteful, and she preferred leaning back, indulging in day-dreams. Ah, day-dreams! for how many, many wasted hours are they not accountable! Profitable morning hours squandered away dreaming of possible futures that never arise to test us in the way in which we have prepared ourselves to meet them! Lazy afternoons and golden evenings, when the Past has seemed dearer, tenderer, than either the Present or the Future, and these have been sacrificed to the thoughts of that! And so Miss Arbuthnot’s morning hours, which, although neither sunny nor bright, were yet given her to work and not to dream in, passed by, and the clock on the mantelpiece proclaimed the hour of twelve.

It was not very long after, that the door was opened, and Mr Rayton was announced. He came into the dull morning-room,—a tall, good-looking man, as Mr Arbuthnot had said. Gentlemanly-looking, perhaps, rather than handsome; and yet, perhaps, stronger than either the beauty or the fact of the gentlemanly appearance, had he about him

the look of a man who has lived his life. Not a drawing-room knight, to whom this background of dull walls, and plates and dishes hung up thereon, which was Miss Arbuthnot's idea of artistic decoration, was in any way suitable. A man with quick dark eyes, and a straight white forehead which contrasted oddly with his dark hair and sunburnt face. A man in whom men and women alike would trust, from that something in his eyes which told of a life that had known sorrow, and could feel sympathy for those who were suffering now. But a life like that, though it may grasp much, does it often grasp worldly success?

Miss Arbuthnot rose up on his entrance, surprised and flushed with nervousness, all expected though he was—a show of feeling most unusual with her. Her work fell at her feet, and the hand trembled that she placed in his.

"I am so glad to find you in," he said. "I hope your sister gave you my message, and that I am not keeping you from any pleasanter engagement?"

"No, indeed no," she said nervously, as she sat down, "I was only so sorry——" and then she flushed again, as he stooped and picked up the work that had fallen between them, and put it into her hand.

"Only so sorry for what?" he asked, with a smile. "You must tell me, or you leave room for me to imagine all sorts of things most unflattering to myself."

"Only sorry," she said gravely, lifting her eyes to his, "that there is any reason to say 'good-bye.'"

"It is a sad word," he assented, "but it is a word that has to be said often enough, for all that. Like many other sad things, there is no avoiding it," he added after a pause, almost as if he were speaking to himself.

The meaning Miss Arbuthnot threw into that somewhat sentimental speech pleased her evidently, for she smiled a little to herself. It as evidently did not please Mr Rayton, for he did not speak for a minute or two, but gazed fixedly beyond the pretty girl's figure in front of him, at a plate with a monster dragon crawling up it, which was behind her—an object that at any other time would not have enchained his attention. Their thoughts, if they could but have read each other's, were widely different, which was not surprising, seeing the one was a girl of nineteen, and the other a man of seven-and-thirty—and a man old even for his years. *She* was thinking of what this future might be that she had sketched out in imagination, and that she was engaged in colouring now, but, alas! only with fancy paints—wondering how she could let him see that her heart was his, and that therefore he need not hesitate about claiming it for his own.

He was thinking how sad it was that his year's holiday was at an end, and that he must return to India and hard work, and quit all the luxuries of English homes and English society; and yet beyond all this, of the farewell he had come to say to this pretty, bright girl, who had been always a favourite of his ever since he first met her six

months ago. Such a bright English girl! And so young!—that was one of her principal charms for Philip Rayton. Youth being a thing of the past for him, he appreciated it all the more in others. And then from that his thoughts went back to other farewells which had had to be said and lived through in the past, his life not having been so smooth and calm as is the life of some.

But however interesting our thoughts may be to ourselves, we cannot sit still when we are in company, and think them out—not often even alone with a dear friend dare we do that—so Philip roused himself when that minute or two had passed, and talked brightly, pleasantly, as was his wont, to Miss Arbuthnot,—he, in common with Cyril Stevens, being a man to whom the society of women was sweet, one who always found plenty to say to them, and could, rarer gift still, listen with interest to what they had to say in return; and Cicely, with her brightness and prettiness, made a pleasant listener. She listened to-day with interest certainly, but with too much anxiety added to it in her face to be as charming a companion as usual: unless the man who was watching her face happened to be in love with the April beauty of it, and could read in the softened eyes and flitting colour that which he was in search of—namely, sorrow for his departure. But if not? Ah me! where a man does not look *caring* to see, I fear me, he remarks but little.

The time was passing. A quarter to one now, and still Mr Rayton had said none of those words

the thought of which every now and then sent the colour flying up into Cicely's face, and made her eyes droop, thus causing a mild wonder in Mr Rayton's mind as to what it was that had disturbed her so much this morning.

He talked on as he always did, in the way that had first won foolish Cicely's heart, but it was a way that did not somehow suit her this morning.

He told her how business had brought him to England—business which he had half hoped might have done great things for him. "For like every one else, Miss Arbuthnot, I want money. But we all want something, you know, that we cannot have, and I would rather want that than many other things."

"Did the business do you no good, then?" questioned Cicely, shyly.

"None. The journey has been a dead loss to me. But still, what I lost another gained," he said, cheerfully; "and I never was great at winning anything."

"Perhaps you do not try hard enough."

"Try hard enough!" he laughed; "perhaps not. But anyhow, I am going to turn over a new leaf now; and ten years hence, when I return a white-haired old Indian, and you are a staid, married woman, you will see what a wondrous fortune I shall have made!"

"I shall never marry," said Cicely, slowly: she really meant *then* what she said.

"Never marry!" he repeated; "why not? Have you taken a vow of celibacy? For me, of course it

is different. Unless I find a begum on the look-out for a husband, I shall have passed into the sere and yellow leaf before I have earned enough to make it possible."

"What do you mean by that?" she questioned.

"Oh, it is a sad subject; we will not talk of it. Tell me instead about yourself, and Delicia—I always like hearing of Delicia—and the Stevens's, these new friends. You know I like hearing all about yourself; it is more interesting than my own plans and hopes."

"I do not think so," she said, gently; "I like hearing about yourself."

"That is because you are a good, kind, sympathetic girl; but in reality my life is less interesting than yours, it being in a way decided for me now, whilst yours is yet open to guesses and speculation. But is that indeed one o'clock? I must go."

"Papa told me to be sure and ask you to stay to lunch; he is coming back on purpose to say 'good-bye.'"

"I am very sorry, but it really is impossible. I have an appointment that I must keep at a quarter to two, but I will try and see him at the club this afternoon: anyhow, I will write and explain matters to him."

He had risen whilst speaking, and was standing looking down at her.

Then the last few moments had really come! She could scarcely believe it, could scarcely indeed realise what the words might mean. Her whole soul, she never having been accustomed to suffer

anything in her life, rose up in revolt against the pain at her heart.

"I am so sorry to say 'good-bye,'" he said, looking down at the bent head and clasped hand; "it is a nasty word at any time, but it seems nastier than ever now, for we have been real friends for so long. It seems scarcely possible that it is only six months since we first met. But you have always been so good about listening patiently to my long grumbles, that we have got to know each other very well. Have we not?" he added after a second, as Cicely did not speak, did not even look up.

"Yes," she said then, in answer to his question. Nothing more, because her voice was trembling. At the sound of that trembling "Yes," Mr Rayton looked down, surprised. "You are sorry, are you not?" he asked kindly, almost tenderly, and he held out his hand.

She rose up then, and put her slight fingers into the strong, outstretched hand. "Yes, I am sorry," she said, and as she spoke a great tear fell on to the clasped hands that were between them.

"My dear," said Mr Rayton gently, laying his other hand over the one he held, "you must not be as sorry as all this; it is bad for me. I wonder if you will be as glad to see me back as you are sorry to see me go!"

"Do not go," she almost whispered.

"Yes, I must indeed, sorry though I am. But see, Miss Arbuthnot," he said, in a would-be cheerful tone, "how late it is! Good-bye," holding her hand in his firm clasp for a second. "I shall

never forget you ; and do not you, on your side, forget your promise that you will be glad to see me back."

He loosed his hold and made a step or two towards the door with those last words on his lips. When—there was the sound of footsteps following his, the touch of a small hand on his arm, and a voice breaking into a quick cry, "Come back! Come back!"

He turned round startled. "What is it?" he questioned, looking at the pitiful face raised to his, whence all the pretty colour had fled—"what is it?" he repeated.

"Oh, you surely know!" she sobbed, laying her slight hands on his coat-sleeve. "Oh do not leave me, do not leave me!" she cried; "I cannot bear!"

His eyes grew soft and tender as he looked upon her, but no responsive love awoke in them—no caress, however small, answered that touch upon his arm; and when she had spoken, Cicely noting all these facts through her sorrow and her tears, felt first a dim awakening to a knowledge of the truth.

But she could not, would not, believe it yet, only beneath the tender look in those eyes bent upon her, her head sank, until her face was hidden in the hands clasped upon his arm.

"My dear," he said gently, not attempting to lift her hidden face, "I could never tell you how good I think it is of you to be fond of me. I value it all the more because I have never known the love of

either mother or sister—I have always been quite alone in the world. But for the future," he went on, "I shall always be able to feel, however far off I may be, that I have left some one in England who is as fond of me as if I really were her brother."

It was not easy for him to speak thus, looking down on the bent head leaning against his arm, at the slight figure convulsed with sobs. It would have been easier to have thrown a kind arm round the girl, and kissed the tears away, and soothed her with fond words and promises,—promises which he could have gone away—and broken! But Philip Rayton was a good man, who was touched with real sorrow at the sight of the girl's distress, and could also, not being very young or very conceited, imagine a time, not so very far distant either, when Cicely would have forgotten him, and when her young life would go on as smoothly again as if he had never troubled its calm waters. For himself, he was not in love, did not even wish to be, for he could see with clear-judging eyes the miseries that would certainly arise from such an imprudent event as a marriage between them two.

But though the facts were clear, it was not so easy to see them with those ruffled auburn locks lying against his arm. Overhead, Jessie having stumbled through many scales and exercises, was now softly and sweetly playing "Home, sweet Home." For many years the memory of that tune haunted Philip Rayton, and the sound of it would always recall those miserable moments spent in the morning-room of 15 Bute Street.

"Cicely," he said at length, the sobs having ceased, "you must not be angry with me, but I must go now. It is never of any use prolonging anything so painful as a farewell, therefore good-bye till our next meeting, which I hope will take place before so very long."

For one second he laid his hand upon her head, almost as if in blessing, then he loosed the hands that still rested on his arm, and moved quietly away. He glanced back when he had reached the door, to take a last look at her.

She was still standing where he had left her, only she had lifted her hands and covered her face with them. Touched by the wretchedness of her aspect as she stood thus all alone, her face flushed with pride and pain, he turned back. "Cicely, I cannot bear that we should part like this," he said, and he took her two hands in his, and removed them from before her face.

She lifted her head then, and looked at him. She was not crying now—her eyes were bright, too bright, and her cheeks were flushed; but as she lifted her head and noted the half-tender, half-pleading gaze bent upon her, she grew as white as marble. She snatched her hands away from his, and with a little stamp, "Go," she cried, fiercely, "I hate you!" And without one other word he went, and she was left alone.

Then with head held very erect, she sat down again in the chair she had lately quitted, and picked up her needlework. Still overhead "Home, sweet

Home" was being played—the clock only pointed to a quarter past one,—and it was all over!

But this was not the point upon which Cicely was dwelling, as she sat sewing with burning eyes and white cheeks. No softness was in her heart: pride, temper, and a host of other little devils were let loose, and prompted the impetuous dig of the needle, and the "I hate him!" which kept repeating itself in her ears.

It may be a shocking sentiment, but I think I prefer poor foolish Cicely Arbuthnot weeping those despairing tears on Philip Rayton's coat-sleeve, to this proud, angry girl, sitting so very upright in her chair, and giving those angry prods with her needle: the former, I think, is the less displeasing woman of the two.

Philip himself, down-stairs in the hall, had no scornful thoughts about the girl he had just left,—indeed he felt something of a lump rise in his throat when he observed the little moist spot on his sleeve, which was the mark of Cicely's tears. And it was with something very nearly approaching love that he thought of the pretty head that had rested there.

"Poor, warm-hearted child!" he thought, "I am afraid she will not step easily through this troublesome world. But I was right, I am sure: it would never have done. I could not have taken her love—and other things too—and have offered so very little in exchange. She is so young," his thoughts ran on, as the hall-door slammed behind him, "that

she will soon forget. I wonder, will she remember her love or her hate longest?"

From which you will see, that when Philip Rayton was alone he did not disguise from himself that it was the love of her young heart, and the fortune that it was well known would go with that love, that Cicely Arbuthnot had offered him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR.

“ Ah, happy he who owns that tenderest joy,
The heart-love of a child ! ”

“ It is indeed irony to call this an ‘ At Home,’ for anything more unhomelike than everything will look, and we shall all look and feel, it would be impossible to imagine.”

Thus spoke Elizabeth Stevens, as she stood tired and dusty in the room which served as general sitting-room at No. 39, late one January afternoon, a duster in her hand.

“ Yes, you are right,” Nan replied, rising from her knees in a distant corner of the room, her arms full of various relics, broken toys, &c. “ At this moment I hope, with all my heart, that every one may be seized with a wish this evening to follow our example, and also be ‘ At Home.’ Now, if there were only artists and those sort of beings expected, much trouble of course, in that case, would be thrown away.”

“ Yes,” said Betty ; “ artists, mercifully, don’t

mind dirt! You now see, Nan, what comes of entering into the society of the 'upper circles.' *Il faut souffrir pour être* sisters of a fascinating brother."

"That reminds me," cried Nan, "that I must go and give a look at the studio, for most probably 'Artful Cicely' will wish to go and see her picture."

"Oh, these women, these women," sighed Betty, "what trouble they do give! Well, if you are going, I wish you would take mother's darning down-stairs, and lock it up either in the coal or wine cellar, and put the key in your own pocket, for I have spent my whole day in removing it, first from one place, and then from another, and here I find it now conspicuously arranged on the mantel-piece as if it were some rare ornament."

"Come as soon as you can, Betty, and we will have tea with the children, to fortify us for what we have to undergo this evening."

"Yes, I shall not be long. Go down and collect the family, and make the tea; and directly I have taken away from this room the look it has at present, as if all the furniture had been heaped up together for the purpose of scrubbing the floor, I will follow you. Now, Christopher, take your boots away with you; the drawing-room is not the place for them to be left in."

A boy of about eleven years of age, who had been seated on the floor, holding in one hand a book which he was reading diligently, whilst with the other he was slowly unlacing his boots, looked up bewildered at the sound of his sister's voice—his

round chubby cheeks forming a singular contrast to his thoughtful dreamy eyes.

"No, 'Infant Prodigy,' it is neither Coriolanus nor Brutus who speaks, but your sister, Elizabeth Stevens, and she is not making a funeral oration over Cæsar, but requesting you to collect your scattered wits, which seem to be a-wool-gathering, and to pick up that singularly muddy pair of boots, and take them away with you. And don't go to sleep again, 'Infant'—at any rate, not till you have taken them up-stairs—or I shall be haunted by the sight of them, as I have been all day by mother's work."

"All right, Betty; don't chaff. I say," looking back from the door, as an after-thought struck him, "can I help you?"

"Yes, certainly. No, on second thoughts, I am much obliged, but I would rather not. A boy, at the best of times, is not a very great help, but a boy who reads Shakespeare whilst unlacing his boots—oh dear, oh dear, the very thought of it makes me shudder!"

Christopher's offer of help was not repeated, the door was shut, and Betty was left to accomplish her task alone.

"It is very pleasant," she soliloquised, as she arranged and rearranged, and listened to every variety of noise going on below, "to live in a family of geniuses, of course; but, oh dear me, when one is tired and hot and dusty, it would be nice, just for a change, to have some one introduced into the family whose ways were neat and orderly, and," with a laugh, "who understood children."

After that she stood for a few minutes quite motionless, looking out into the Square ; and then, "Poor Delicia," she said with a sigh, as she turned back to her tidying—and on her keen, clever face was a look of womanly pity that did not often find a place there.

A long tea-table, and many, many children seated round it, was what greeted Elizabeth's eyes when, half an hour later, her toils over, she opened the dining-room door.

The buzz of several voices raised in welcome greeted her on her entrance, and a fair-haired, still pretty woman, the mother of the party, asked, but in such low tones that they were scarcely audible above the rising tumult, whether the room above was ready for the evening ; and then, without waiting a reply, betook herself once more to counting the stitches in the heel of a stocking she was knitting, and to the perusal of the book resting on her knee, at which she glanced as often as her work did not require her whole attention. A pretty woman still was Mrs Stevens, despite the twelve children, and the cares and troubles she had known ; and looking at her thus, in the half darkness, with her head bent over her book, it is hard to realise she is the mother of the tall, alert girl by her side.

"Oh, mother, mother !" in piteous tones, made Mrs Stevens at length look up from her book—an article in a scientific magazine—and glance appealingly at Elizabeth. "Betty, dear, do make Jack be quiet. Jack, what is the matter ? I cannot think how you can scream so !"

"Be quiet, Jack," interposed Betty sharply, and instantly her mother's thoughts reverted to Cleopatra's Needle.

"Be quiet indeed!" retorted Jack. "Make Bob leave me alone, then. He was pressing my fingers against the jug of boiling water, and it was *agony*! See," holding up a small, fat, baby hand with a red streak across it.

"Nan, you are nearest to him. Box Bob's ears for being cruel to Jack."

"Bob, consider your ears boxed," said Nan, who was standing behind the infant sinner, arranging ferns in a tall glass; "for I cannot turn round to attend to you just now. You ought to be ashamed of yourself thus to ill-treat a baby of six years old."

"I wasn't ill-treating him," mumbled Bob, who might have been two years older. "I was subjecting him to ordeal by fire for stealing my last piece of bread-and-jam, and saying he hadn't touched it. It was a story, you see, for he could not bear it!"

"This is not the place or the time to have ordeal by fire or anything else. Angelica, don't drink out of Bob's cup, and put your hands down."

Angelica looked up piteously. "Oh, Betty, do leave Bob and me alone; we are swearing eternal friendship, and people always drink out of each other's cups then—Bob says so; and my fingers are the bars of my helmet."

"Yes, Jack used to be my chum," said Bob, vindictively, gazing at the tearful child on his other side, who was still watching his little scalded hand; 'but since he stole my jam, and cannot stand or-

deal by fire, I shall have nothing more to say to him." Whereat Jack set up a melancholy howl, which caused his mother to glance up, and say, "Don't be naughty, Jack, darling;" and Angelica to remark, "Yes, I'm Bob's friend now," with a side glance of disdain at the weeping baby.

But before the battle came to an end, the door opened to admit the father of this hopeful family.

Very like the son, with whom we have already made acquaintance, was this same tall father with the stooping shoulders, only in his eyes shone the brilliance that was reflected in those of Elizabeth, and the mouth had none of the weak, undecided lines about it that marred Cyril's.

The children ceased squabbling as he took his seat, and looked up with smiles of welcome and small wonder. For not one of them could recall the occasion when a harsh word had greeted them, or a look had told them that they were unwelcome. No: poverty Mr Stevens had had to fight with, and a stern, bitter fight it had been; but though it had tinged his hair with grey, it had not aged or wearied his heart, or ever made him regret the fulness of his quiver.

All the sorrow his life has ever known is summed up in the one little word "Nellie," and the story of that sorrow is soon told by the sound of a crutch as it comes down the passage, and the door is opened, and a little fair-haired girl enters, who moves at once to her father's side.

"Come, Nell," Mr Stevens says, holding out a welcoming hand. And the mother, hearing her

husband's voice, for the first time shuts her book, and looks up into his face with a smile.

In all the many years these two have lived together, the times are very, very rare when that answering smile has not passed between them; and in Wat Stevens' eyes the smile of his wife is just as sweet and clear now as when he, a poor young artist, married the sixteen-year-old orphan daughter of old Philips, who had spent a lifetime in the pursuit of knowledge, and who died at length, leaving his little daughter with nothing but the memory of her father's fame whereon to live.

But though thus married in haste, Mr Stevens had not fulfilled the rest of the proverb, but on the contrary had repented less and less as the years went by—always seeing in the fading, fair-haired, loving woman, the pretty grey-eyed girl he had married. And whatever else had changed with the changing years, her love had never done so, but had increased as time went on: and though, being an affectionate woman, she loved her children well, yet the great passion of her life was still poured out on the man who had been all in all to her for so many years—which is rare, for most women's life-love is only made perfect in their love for their children, whereas that of a man reaches its highest in his love for his wife.

"Chris, you are not allowed to read at tea," remarked Bob, anxious to attract attention to some one else's misdeeds. "Father, did you not say so? Chris has a book open on his knee."

"Selfish Bob," said Jack, soothingly, to Chris-

topher, remembering his own grievances, as his father said, "Come, Chris, put away your book. It is very rude; you have plenty of time to read during the day."

"Ma reads at tea-time," said Chris, as he shut up his Shakespeare with a slam.

"Your mother is old enough to do as she likes," said Mr Stevens.

"But I don't see," said Christopher, with the air of a judge, "why it should be less rude to read at meal-times when one is old than when one is young."

"Now, Chris, don't argue," cried Betty, "or I shall go away, and return in half an hour, hoping the last word will then have been said. And, by the by, as you have attracted attention to yourself, remember you are to come down to-night."

"No, no!" cried Christopher in dismay, quite forgetting his other grief in this new one—"no, no! Mother, I may go to bed, may I not?"

"What is it, my dear?" inquired Mrs Stevens, once more quitting Cleopatra's Needle. "Go to bed!—why?"

"Oh, but, mother, I need not come down to-night. I promise——"

"No, Chris, there is no use appealing to mother, or promising anything. You promised last time, and I remember how you kept your promise. No, to-night you must come down, and stay down till all the little ones are asleep. You may go to bed at eleven, if you like."

Here there was a piteous wail from all the little ones of, "May not we come down? oh, dear

Betty!" And Christopher dejectedly remarked, "Need I dress?"

"Yes, certainly. Father, will you give it as an order, for I am not going to endure the tortures of mind I did last time, caused by seeing white figures on the stairs every time I went out of the drawing-room door. The children are quite good and obedient alone, and Chris must dress and stay down-stairs till they are asleep."

"Very well, dear. Chris, you hear what Betty says: now please do not let us have any trouble to-night."

"May I not sit in the studio,—or the kitchen,—or even in the cellar?—or—why, I would go into the garden,—oh, dear father!"

"No, father, it is a punishment because he was so disobedient last time. So there is no use arguing, Chris; you are to dress, and come down, and not to go away till I give you leave."

"And Nell, my sweet little Nell, is she coming down!"

"Oh yes, father," said Betty; "Nell will have to play. You will not mind, will you, dear?" turning to the child.

Even Elizabeth Stevens' quick decided tones softened when speaking to her crippled sister, and the child well repaid the love lavished upon her; no one had ever known her voice raised in anger, or heard a selfish word pass her lips. Her life was one act of love to those about her; but dearly as she cared for them all, it was to her father she clung most. Her father it was she was ever with;

indeed it was a word in the house that you had only to find the one to be certain that the other was not very far off.

And yet, though Mr Stevens could not bear his little daughter to be out of his sight, there were times when the sound of her crutch had seemed to hurt his very heart—a time when the sight of her pale face had given him many a bitter moment, for it had been from his arms she had sprung when she had had the fall that crippled her for life ;—it was to his carelessness that the baby-daughter had to owe her lifelong trial.

So it was to Nellie that Mr Stevens' eyes turned when the troubles of his life passed in review before him : they did not rest long even on the little grave under foreign skies, which had caused many a heart-ache at the time. The poverty he had known, the struggles he had endured, were as nothing, for the sake of the love that had gilded those bitter days ; only in Nellie's pale cheeks, and in the sound of her crutch, did Wat Stevens recognise the sorrow which is the share of all those on whom rests the curse of Adam's fall.

CHAPTER VIII.

THORNS BELOW AND FLOWERS ABOVE.

"Before the beginning of years
 There came to the making of man
 Time, with a gift of tears;
 Grief, with a glass that ran;
 Pleasure, with pain for leaven;
 Summer, with leaves that fell;
 Remembrance, fallen from Heaven;
 And madness, risen from Hell;
 Strength, without hands to smite;
 Love, that endures for a breath;
 Night, the shadow of light;
 And life, the shadow of Death."

"I CANNOT help wondering," said Betty, pausing to speak to her sister in the course of the evening, "if these good people assembled together could know the way we have toiled all day preparing for them, whether they would think the enjoyment worth the previous trouble, for I am sure I don't."

"Betty, do take off your spectacles; you have no idea how ugly you look with them on,—and Mr Elliot is here. I just saw him come in," was Nan's somewhat irrelevant reply.

"Thank you, dear, for the suggestion as to my

beauty, so artfully veiled that it takes all my natural acuteness to read between the lines. But I am afraid, even for the sake of appearing lovely in the eyes of Mr Elliot, I cannot agree to condemn myself to semi-blindness. Why, who knows, I might find myself flirting with 'Samuel' all unwittingly, or worse still, mistaking the artful Cicely for some one else, and telling her what I think of her!"

"That would never do; and that reminds me, have you seen the Siren?"

"No; but as I see our brother's head in the distance, and his eyes bent admiringly upon mother's imitation begonias, I conclude that some one else is looking admiringly at them also, so I shall go and interrupt; and do you, like a good girl, tell mother she has talked quite long enough to Mr Falkner about the tumuli of the British Isles, and that she must play something, for no one else likes to be the first."

And whilst Nan threaded her way to her mother's side, Betty turned in the direction of the begonias aforementioned, near which a dark head was visible, bending with admiring eyes over a pretty, upturned face, flushed with mingled gratified vanity and pleasure.

"Good evening, Miss Arbuthnot; it is difficult to recognise one's friends in such a crowd."

Cicely held out her hand with a look on her face which might have been interpreted into a wish that Miss Stevens had not contrived, at that precise moment, to discover her friends.

As to Cyril, he was annoyed, and he made small attempt to hide it. He would like to have said something sharp and to the point, but the exact "something" was difficult to think of, with Elizabeth standing between him and Miss Arbuthnot, talking politely to her, and leaving him to feel the one in the unenviable position of being *de trop*. For a second he hesitated between turning away and resuming his conversation at a more fortunate time, and saying that sharp word to Betty which she would of a certainty understand the meaning of, but which it was also sadly to be feared she was not in the least likely to take as a hint; and whilst he thus hesitated, he felt himself being pushed out of the way.

Looking round, he became aware of the fact that the four legs of a chair were being by no means gently used as a means of forcing him on one side; and behind the said four legs appeared the flushed face of a small boy, most neatly attired in black clothes and large white collar, a thick book under his arm.

"Christopher," he said, angrily, "what are you doing?"

"Hush," said the child, mysteriously. "Make room for me there, will you? and don't say anything. There was not a chair in the room, so I had to fetch this one from the nursery."

Cyril was not ill-natured; indeed he was rather a favourite with the children, who easily contrived to get what they wanted from him, indolence being ever an excellent imitation of kindness: besides, the

boy's proceedings did not scandalise him so much as they might have done one brought up in a more decorous household; so he lifted the chair into the corner in which he had been standing, and squeezed his little brother into it.

"Why are you not in bed?" he asked.

And Christopher in a hoarse whisper informed him that it was a beastly shame, and all Betty's doing, and was proceeding to further details when he found his brother's attention had wandered, so said no more, but turning the chair round, so that when he sat down he had his face to the wall, opened his book, put his fingers in his ears, and soon, despite the noise and confusion around, was entirely absorbed in it, to the exclusion of everything else.

Cyril returned to Miss Arbuthnot's side, and with more determination than he was generally capable of showing, said, offering his arm, "Come, it is too warm here; do let me try and find a chair for you in a cooler place."

Cicely not being shy, but on the contrary a girl quite capable of seizing the opportunities afforded her of amusing herself, slid her hand into it, and with a nod and sweet smile to Betty turned away.

Directly they were out of danger of being overheard by Miss Stevens' sharp ears, "Take me to see my picture," she said, in her low voice, "if it is not giving you too much trouble, for I should so like to see how it looks by candle-light."

For many days and weeks had now elapsed since

Miss Mainwaring's tea-party, and several sittings for the picture had taken place already.

"Yes, that is a happy thought," he replied, looking admiringly down into the soft eyes upraised to his; "but first you shall sit down here whilst I fetch you an ice, and then you shall tell me what you have been doing with yourself to-day. It was a very dull day for me; and when four o'clock came round, I found the next hour and a half very long."

"You might have gone over to see Delicia. You used always to do so at that time, did you not?"

A little line straightened itself out across Cyril's forehead, and for a second he did not answer. He was thinking of those hours spent at No. 1, which now seemed so like a dream, but which, at the time, had been such a pleasant reality.

"It is a long while since I called on her," he said at length, and he spoke quite carelessly; "I must really try and mend my manners."

Then their conversation reverted to themselves and their own interests, and neither of them again alluded to Delicia Mainwaring.

For several minutes after her brother and Miss Arbuthnot had thus taken the law into their own hands, and had departed, leaving her behind, Elizabeth stood looking after them. So far she owned herself vanquished, and had no future thought of interrupting their *tête-à-tête*; instead, she amused herself by watching the various groups about her. Nan's voice disturbed her, repeating her name.

"Ask Betty," she was saying to an ungainly but

withal pleasant-looking man who was standing by her.

Then Betty felt a hand touch hers, and as she turned her head, Nan's voice questioned softly, for Nelly was playing on the violin, and the whole room was hushed to attention. "What is Christopher doing?"

Then Betty first became aware of the child in the corner behind her, with his back to the company, his knees drawn up till they nearly touched his chin, his elbows resting on them, his fingers in his ears, and his eyes bent with absorbing interest on the page before him.

"Christopher," she whispered, a gleam of amusement in her eyes, and she touched his arm.

Like a tiger cat the child swept himself round, and glared at them over the back of his chair.

"Bother you, Nan," he cried, she being the first on whom his gaze fell, "can't you leave a fellow alone? It is too bad! Oh, it is Betty. If you don't leave me in peace, I will come out, and stand on my head in the middle of the floor; and nothing—no one," he added vindictively, "will be able to make me leave off!"

"The 'Infant Prodigy,' Mr Fullerton," said Betty, to the man by her side, "speaketh its mind. Let those who hear beware!"

"Best let sleeping dogs lie, Miss Stevens."

"So I think, discretion being the better part of valour. Nevertheless I shall go to another part of the room for fear of a fresh attack; when think, if you were not here to defend me, what the con-

sequences might be, left at the mercy of this infuriated genius!"

"*Quel enfant!*" ejaculated an elderly Frenchman who had passed near them, listening to their conversation; and he gazed with much interest for some time at the back of Christopher's much-ruffled head; and then he went home and added a chapter to his work on English domestic life—about the curious fashion in which children were brought up and permitted to behave in our favoured land.

Christopher, however, neither knew of nor cared for the shadow he was causing to be thrown over Great Britain, but calmly went on with his book; Mr Fullerton and Nan returned to their conversation, and Betty to her post of observation. But she was not doomed to be left long in peace.

"Good evening, Miss Stevens; I have been hunting for you everywhere."

And Elizabeth found herself face to face with a tall ugly man, with bright clever eyes, and a quick way of talking and gesticulating that was somehow very attractive.

"Good evening, Mr Elliot," replied Betty, lowering her voice till it was almost inaudible; "I am sorry to have given you so much trouble. Forgive me, but really you must not talk so loud in the midst of this sonata, or you will have some musical maniac taking you to task."

"Bother the music—I hate it! The only good of it is, that it makes a noise. I wish the musicians——"

"Now pray do not wish them any evil, because my mother and sister are playing."

"How sorry I am! but I always do contrive to say the wrong thing. Forget it, however, or at any rate never mind it, and let us go to some place where we can talk in peace. I have so much I wish to say to you. I have so many things to ask you!"

"Now, please, do not be in such a hurry; for haste always gives me a headache. One thing at a time, *please*. But why cannot you ask your questions here?"

"Because I would rather not. Come, let us go to the studio; I should like to see how the 'Spanish Beggars' are getting on."

"O solitude!" murmured Betty, still hesitating.

"Of course, if you would rather not," he said, in a vexed tone; and as Elizabeth made no answer—"of course, the crowd is what one goes forth to seek. Fancy expecting a woman to prefer the—what shall I call it?—the admiration of the one to that of the many!"

"Yes, fancy!" retorted Betty; "that shows how very little you know about women!"

"Why, any woman would fifty times rather stand on a pedestal to be admired by a gaping crowd than be worshipped by one man alone."

"Yes, Mr Elliot, that is such a well-known fact in history that I wonder you should have forgotten it, even for a moment."

It was so utterly impossible to tell from her tone

whether she were in jest or earnest, that Mr Elliot looked and felt quite bewildered.

"I do not believe that you are wholly a woman," at length he said, bitterly; "you have so little that is womanly about you. I believe you care for nothing except admiration."

"So young, so lovely!" murmured Betty, mockingly; "small wonder was it that she was so vain."

"No; to give you your due, I do not think you are vain of anything but your intellect—and I hate it!" he added, half under his breath.

"How rude, and how unkind!" she laughed. "It is a small thing, but my own,—that is what I feel about it. But come, we will not quarrel. Instead, let us go to the studio and see the picture, as you are so anxious about its progress."

Their conversation had taken place in the doorway, whither they had gone so as to avoid letting the sound of their voices interfere with the musicians, and at her words Mr Elliot offered her his arm, and they made their way up-stairs to the studio. But another couple had preceded them, (was Betty aware of the fact, we may wonder?) and the sound of their hushed voices was the first thing that greeted Mr Elliot's ears as he opened the door.

A very good-looking couple—the tall man with the fine dark head, and the pretty, slender girl clinging to his arm, and listening to his whispered words, as he compared the picture before them with the reality by his side.

"You knew there was some one here," said Mr Elliot, in a slightly raised voice.

"I guessed it," Elizabeth replied quickly, a gleam of amusement shining in her dark eyes the while, as she noted how her brother moved away from Miss Arbuthnot's side, and the languid wrath that for a second overcame him.

Miss Arbuthnot was the first to speak. "It is so pretty," she said softly, lifting her long lashes slowly and looking at Mr Elliot.

Mr Elliot immediately crossed the room to her side, and looked admiringly, first at the picture, and then at the original. "It is very perfect," he said, as if in answer to those pretty eyes, "and very like. You have been most fortunate, Stevens."

After that he stayed on by Miss Arbuthnot's side, whispering little words of praise as seemed expected of him; for it appeared to every man who spoke to Cicely that she was one to be tenderly dealt with—one who merited kind words and looks from all who came in contact with her. And why? what did she do to deserve them? Ah me! this world's good gifts are ever unfairly meted out, so it seems to us: to those who have everything—to them is added love and kindness from those around; to those who have nought, and who therefore would be grateful for so little—to them nothing is offered.

And here comes one to whom the merest crumbs of sympathy, affection, love, would be, oh, so welcome! and what is given to her?

"I have brought Miss Mainwaring," said Mr Stevens, senior, joining the little group before the picture, "to give her unbiassed opinion on *THE* question of the day."

"Dear Delicia," cried Cicely, laying a caressing hand upon her friend's arm, "do come and look ! Is it not lovely ?"

Mr Stevens had painted Cicely much as he had first intended ; only instead of a St Cecilia at her organ, here was a fair English girl dressed in white, kneeling on the cushions of a wide window-seat, scanning by the faint light that shone upon her through coloured glass an opal ring.

"What do you think you will call it?" questioned Miss Mainwaring, and she raised her steady eyes to Cyril's proud, triumphant ones.

"I shall call it 'Engaged,'" he answered ; "and really I think that it has every chance for the Academy ; don't you ?"

"Yes, I hope so, for it will do you such credit. It is a beautiful painting."

"Yes, it is the best thing Cyril has ever done," his father said. "It will make a name for him."

"Indeed I hope it may," replied Miss Mainwaring, warmly ; "you deserve to succeed, Mr Stevens, for you have worked so hard."

"Thanks for your good wishes ; I hope I deserve them," he made answer ; and then his eyes quitted her grave, serious face, and rested instead upon the brilliant one beside it.

After that Miss Mainwaring moved away, leaving those two standing together, to speak a few words to Betty.

"You are looking tired, Miss Stevens," she said. "I am afraid an evening like this is not so pleasant to the hostess as to the guests."

"Indeed you are mistaken, Miss Mainwaring, for I love society, as Mr Elliot will tell you. We have just been arguing hotly on the subject, and his theory is that all women——"

"Betty," interrupted her brother, turning sharply round, "I do wish on these festive occasions you would dispense with your spectacles; they make you look hideous," he added, with brotherly frankness. "Don't you think so, Elliot?"

"I do not like them," Mr Elliot replied. "Why do you wear them?"

Betty's answer was not given to him, but to her brother. "I wear them for the same reason as did the wolf in Red Riding Hood—the better to see with; and I find that they answer their purpose admirably."

Cyril did not reply, and he reddened a little as he turned back to Miss Arbuthnot's side.

After her visit to the studio, Miss Mainwaring took her departure. She was tired, she told her host, and had a headache; and when kindly Mr Stevens offered to escort her home, she willingly agreed to the proposition.

He waited to see her house-door open and receive her, and then returned to No. 39, his thoughts full of the gracious, calm woman he had just parted from, as his son's had so often been on the same short journey.

Up in her own room, Miss Mainwaring dismissed her maid, and for a long, long time paced up and down, thinking. Her thoughts were not of a cheerful nature—not so pleasant even as they had been

on that night when she had stood beneath the City merchant's portrait, with that uncertain "If" hovering on her lips; and the lines about her mouth were harder, sterner, than they had been on that occasion—now nearly two months ago. But still, notwithstanding her trouble—and she was troubled—Miss Mainwaring was the same calm, sensible woman we have always known. "I do not blame him," she was thinking; "not in the least. He never pretended that he cared for me in *that* way. And I do not blame myself either," she added, lifting her bent head with a certain proud gesture; "I acknowledge it. I drifted from friendship into love without knowing; and because *I* loved, I fancied that he must also. But I have found out my mistake," she concluded, a little bitterly. "If I only guessed it before, I *know* it from to-night; so now I have nothing else to do but to forget—not *him*, but my foolish, most foolish mistake."

And then she lifted the blind and looked across to where the lights still shone in the windows opposite—to where, could she but have seen, a man stood gazing with soft, loving eyes at the picture of a sweet English girl, toying with the opals in the reflection of the coloured windows—to where, in a large room above, two girls were seated talking.

"Did you enjoy your evening, Nan? Was Samuel as fascinating as ever?"

"Yes, it was a happy time," Nan made reply. "And you," raising her head with a look of interest,—"did Mr Elliot propose?"

"Propose indeed, Nan! You never mean to say that you think Mr Elliot is in earnest?"

"From what I have seen of him, I should certainly say there was no doubt of it."

"Now that is odd, Nan, for such an idea has never occurred to me; so I have taken precautions, for I should hate to be made a fool of."

"Small fear of that, I should say," retorted the younger sister.

For some seconds Betty did not speak; then, "Nan," she said, suddenly, leaning forward and taking off her spectacles, and fixing her dark eyes on the fire.

"Well?"

"What a pity it is, Nan," she said, slowly, "that my tongue will not say the things that I wish it to say!"

"Why?"

"Why? Oh, because I do not think it is likely Mr Elliot will propose after to-night; for he told me he thought I was the most *unwomanly* woman he had ever known, and that he did not think me good-looking, and that he hated my intellect,—all of which, you see, points but to one conclusion."

"Betty, Betty, what a pity it is you are so clever! But, dear," cried Nan, throwing herself on her knees by her sister's side, and putting her arms about her, "do take a warning, even though it is from me, and do not trifle with your happiness, as you are doing—I know you are!"

"What do you mean, you foolish girl?" but Betty's voice was less distinct than usual.

"Oh, you know, Betty. Don't be sharp with him, and laugh at him, as you always do. Promise me you will behave differently next time."

"Not the least use promising," said Betty, in a hopeless voice, "because, try as I may, I know quite well that I shall never be able to say a civil word to any man. That is written against my name in the book of fate."

"But this one man?" urged Nan.

"Impossible, my dear; I have tried often, but it is all of no use. And it is a great pity, because no man, therefore, will ever find out what a charming helpmeet I should have made!"

CHAPTER IX.

A LIGHT HEART LIVES LONG.

Don Carlos. All things that live have some means of defence.

Lucus. Ay, all—save only lovely, helpless woman.

Don Carlos. Nay, woman has her tongue—armed to the teeth."

"WHAT is your opinion, father, of Miss Cicely Arbuthnot? Perhaps I am prejudiced against her, but I do not like her."

It was the day after the "At Home" at No. 39, and Elizabeth Stevens was standing watching her father, who was hard at work.

"Cicely Arbuthnot?" repeated Mr Stevens, in a vague, questioning way, his mind being more given to his pictures than to the inhabitants of the world about him.

But on Betty repeating, "Yes, father—Cicely Arbuthnot," he came out of his reverie, and, "What do I think of her? A pretty girl," he said—"very pretty," and looking across as he spoke to the easel whereon rested Cyril's *chef-d'œuvre*. "She has inspired him, at any rate. I never knew he had so much in him."

"Nor I," laughed Betty. "See what love can do!"

"Love?" repeated Mr Stevens; and he grew thoughtful for a minute over the mixing of his colours.

"But, father," said Betty, as Mr Stevens showed signs of again becoming absorbed in his work, "her beauty is not what I am thinking of. Tell me what your opinion of her is, apart from that, as a woman."

"There you puzzle me; I hardly know what to say."

"She is a flirt."

"Yes," assented Mr Stevens, "she is a flirt. But that is a word with such a wide signification. A girl has only to be popular with men, to be younger, prettier than her fellows, to be cleverer—their superior in any way—to be called that. I do not object to some kinds of flirts myself. Now a young and pretty woman who lays herself out to charm me—the father of twelve children—I should never be hard on!"

"For instance, Miss Arbuthnot?"

"For instance, Miss Arbuthnot. But all the same, she has not quite arrived at perfection in the art yet; she still makes mistakes."

"Cyril has not found them out."

"No, nor ever will. The mistake that she makes is, that she imagines the same road leads to every man's heart, and that is a great and fundamental error. Fancy imagining that the same steps lead to *my* good graces and to Cyril's! No; she wants practice," concluded Mr Stevens, with a laugh.

Betty laughed too. "What fools men are! A pretty face, a soft voice, a little confidence bestowed, and they all, including your father, are at any woman's feet!"

"Oh no, my dear; we are not all fools. We see through them, you know—at least, we could if we would; but what would be the use of it? It is pleasanter, I think, to pretend to be taken in, and listen to the voice of the charmer, and pass a pleasant hour, whilst she is flattering us ignorantly or cleverly, than to encase ourselves in defensive armour, and refuse to listen to anything except disagreeable home truths."

"My dear father, why did I not inherit your disposition as well as your face? But alack! alack!"

"Yes, you may well sigh, Betty; for depend upon it, my dear, you will never have a world of men sighing at *your* feet. If Penelope had had your tongue, she need never have spent her nights in unpicking her needlework, for not a man amongst her lovers but would have been thankful to see Ulysses return—sorry for him, perhaps, but most thankful for themselves."

"Well, father, I must take a lesson from Cicely Arbuthnot; perhaps she might be able to give me a hint."

"No," laughed her father, "you must go to a better teacher than Miss Arbuthnot—either to some one who has so entirely mastered the subject as to have arrived at the art which conceals art; or else to one who has never dabbled in art at all, and is

as Nature made her. And talking of that reminds me of Delicia Mainwaring. What a woman she is! One in a hundred, or a thousand, I should say."

"You are right, father," cried Betty, warmly. "I do not often like women, or believe in them—I am afraid, like you, I see through them; but I must say that I believe as thoroughly in Delicia Mainwaring as I would in an honest, trustworthy man—and that is the highest compliment I could pay her."

"Well done, Betty! Who is the object of your admiration?"

Betty turned to see her brother standing in the doorway.

"Miss Mainwaring," she said quietly, and Cyril made no further remark.

"I never heard Betty say anything before which could so nearly be screwed into a compliment to a man," said her father, as he laid down his brushes and moved towards the door, in answer to the loud ringing of a bell outside, which announced tea was ready.

"The ideal man, father," retorted Betty; "and I am sadly afraid that I am never likely to find anything that approaches him more nearly than Delicia Mainwaring, so I had better make the most of her. Well, Cyril," as the door closed behind Mr Stevens, "I suppose I must also depart, and leave you 'monarch of all you survey.' The hour, the fatal hour, draws near, does it not?"

"Don't go," said Cyril, and he turned and restlessly pushed the hair off his forehead with nervous

fingers; "stay, Betty—at any rate, for a little while."

"What a fortunate thing it is that I know better than to take you at your word, is it not? But I have profited by my bringing up, and I know how utterly the presence of another destroys the artist's brightest dream." And with an amusing imitation of Cyril's own way of talking, "Let me strive to remember that it is in solitude that the artist's brightest creation comes to light; that it is in solitude (above all, when shared with a pretty girl) that he accomplishes the work which he sends forth to startle and surprise the world!" And with a sweeping curtsey, and a finger pointed in the direction of the picture, Betty turned away.

"It is a great pity you did not go on the stage, Betty, where your great talents might have made you a fortune."

"But I doubt it," interpolated Elizabeth, "O ironical Cyril!"

"But here you are not paid to mimic; and I am in earnest," changing his voice to something that sounded almost like pleading—"I would rather you stayed."

"And I am really sorry to disoblige you; but I cannot, even for your sake, consent to sit here for two hours listening to a conversation on high art—with illustrations,"—this last in a lower tone, as she opened the door. "But I forgot," she added, mischievously—"father did not think hers were illustrations of *high* art."

"What did you say? Come back," cried Cyril,

in a slightly raised voice, missing the words, but guessing something of their import.

Elizabeth did not hear, or at any rate did not allow that she heard, but went on to the dining-room, her eyes gleaming with fun behind her glasses.

A little laugh escaped her as she stood in the semi-dark hall. "He is afraid," she said to herself, "I do believe. Frightened to death, like Frankenstein, at the monster he has himself raised. However, it serves him right, and I do not feel the least inclined to go and chaperon him." And then with another laugh, "I will send mother," she said, as she entered the dining-room, which she accordingly did when, a little later on, the two Miss Arbuthnots arrived.

Whether Mrs Stevens, still much interested in the movements of Cleopatra's Needle, proved an efficient chaperon or not, it does not enter into our province to question; but at any rate she departed to the studio, with her stocking and her book, in which latter she soon became so absorbed that it startled her greatly when two hours later she was aroused by her son to say good-bye to her guest.

It was not often Cicely was willing to take Jessie out with her, but this day had proved an exception.

Excited, elated, as she was, the small jealousies of her younger sister that had once so possessed her had of late somewhat died out.

Her whole time now was passed in one anxious looking forward to the how, when, and where she could next see Cyril Stevens. Philip Rayton and his tragic leave-taking had, as he had known but

too well it would, become a mere dream of the past. It had scarcely been a reality even at the time, only this fact she had not recognised till too late; and by the aid of this new excitement which had so immediately succeeded it, she had contrived almost entirely to forget the bitterness of it. The sting it had left behind had only caused her to rush more recklessly into anything new that offered; and the consequence was, that all the powers of her mind were now set towards winning the love of Cyril Stevens. She saw him, not as he was in truth, but as the hero of her life,—a genius, stand-apart from the world; not from vanity, love of display, or any other worldly motive, but solely through the might of his genius—lonely, misunderstood, and craving for sympathy, for love, from an unsympathetic, unloving world.

To the calmer voice of reason she never listened—the voice that warned her of other mistakes she had made in her young ignorant life.

No: here she was gifted with perfect knowledge,—she alone saw him, knew him, as he really was. And as she had let her foolish, ill-guided heart mislead her in the matter of Philip Rayton, so did she let it do so once again, only with this difference, that there was small difficulty in seeing in this case that Cyril Stevens' heart was fast passing out of his own keeping, and that he lived of late only in the light of her eyes.

All of which is a digression, meant only to show how it was that Jessie Arbuthnot found herself at the Stevens's tea-table on this evening in question.

She made herself pleasant too—pleasanter, perhaps, than Cicely would have done under the circumstances; for children amused her, especially such curious morsels of humanity as the Stevens family.

For Jessie had none of the petty affectations which characterised Cicely; was not difficult to be amused, nor shy of showing that she was amused; neither was she one of those young ladies who require a man to be present to show themselves at their best—or, at least, she had not as yet passed into that stage of her existence.

And tea at No. 39 was an amusing meal. Mr Stevens was always worth listening to; his theories of life were so clever and original. Fortunately, perhaps, for himself and others, the twelve children had always prevented him putting his theories into practice.

The mere fact of having taken a wife before his twentieth year had rather stood in the way of doing more than thinking how bread and butter and the necessary joints of meat were to be obtained. In his theories he somewhat reminded his hearers of Cyril, but it was Cyril without his one-sidedness or his egotism.

Then it was the children's hour, *par excellence*—not that they were shut out of much in that house; and the odds and ends of information they had gleaned from their elders, mingled with their own originality, were always entertaining; and last, but not least, Betty was generally present, four-o'clock tea at home being a meal to which she was partial; and if a little sharp, she was often amusing—at

least to her own small brothers and sisters, to whom she was an unfailing source of delight; and they were always disappointed if they missed her clever face and blue spectacles from their own particular feast. But to do Betty justice, that did not often occur. It happened much oftener that Nan's duties or pleasures called her elsewhere as four o'clock came round. On this particular evening she was absent, and there was a cry of welcome from the younger members when Elizabeth entered the room—a cry that was immediately hushed when they perceived the stranger who followed her in.

“I have brought Miss Arbuthnot for a cup of tea, father,” she said, by way of introduction; and after that it was she made the request of her mother, which ended by that good lady retiring with her book to the studio. Very shortly the unusual shyness of the children produced by the appearance of Jessie Arbuthnot vanished, and they were all talking, arguing, and stating each one his own opinion in the manner habitual to the family Stevens.

“Dot Fraser is going to be married,” at length volunteered Mr Stevens.

“To whom?” questioned Betty, all her woman's curiosity aroused at the words.

“To young Gibson—that promising young man who paints in Forbes's studio; you remember him?”

“Remember him?” repeated Betty; “I should think I did! Now here is another instance of the small use it is trusting to the words of man, for on the *only* occasion on which I saw him he paid me most marked attention.”

"Poor, disappointed Betty," remarked her father, with a laugh.

"Jealous," said Bob. And "Mr Gibson has made a better bargain," cried Christopher.

The cross-fire did not affect Betty much ; perhaps she was used to it.

Christopher, however, being the last speaker, drew attention to himself.

"You may scoff, 'Infant Prodigy;' but know this, that your sister, ere her youth became one of the things of other days, had a lover ; and if it had not been for her own folly, she might at this present moment have long ceased to be a tormented spinster."

"Did he pay you as much attention as Mr Gibson?" asked Christopher, still vindictively inclined towards Betty for her share in his grievances of the previous evening.

"Now, 'Infant Prodigy,' you really must learn not to be so sarcastic ; above all, when you are being told a real *bond fide* love-story. Sympathy would be more appropriate."

Christopher snorted with mingled contempt and mockery ; but Susy, a rosy-cheeked school-girl of thirteen, cried, "Go on, Betty—tell us the story, do."

"A story indeed !" repeated Betty, tragically. "And is it thus, Susy, that you can speak of the woes of your sister?" But, changing her tone, "rather than that Christopher should imagine for one moment that his sister has all her life long been the slighted being that he at present imagines her to

be, I will inform you all, in confidence of course, that once upon a time a man liked me."

"Oh, Betty!" cried Susy, with a disappointed air, "that is nothing, not nearly exciting enough."

"Susy, when one is telling one's own story, one is obliged to tell it modestly. But to continue: He came here often, and he always talked upon the same subject—the merits of a collie dog, of which he was the proud possessor. The dog could do this, the dog could do that—until at length one day, in a fit of envy, for dogs have always been favourites with me, I told him that I was jealous of his possessing such an animal; and he said——"

Here, as Betty paused in her narrative, "Go on," cried several children.

"He said," continued Betty, "'Miss Stevens, you shall have Beppo for your own if you like, but you must take me with him!'" 'Sir,' I replied, seeing the importance of the situation at once, 'I must see the dog first!'"

There was a laugh, and an aside from her father of, "Oh, Betty, that was like you. You would never get the worst of a bargain."

"I hope not, father," said Betty, severely; "such folly is only too common in the family."

"Go on," cried little Angelica, who was listening open-mouthed. "Did you see the dog? What was it like?"

"Yes, Angelica; listen and be warned. One day, as I was driving home in a cab late in the afternoon, I saw a crowd collected, and in the centre of it was my friend. On drawing nearer, I saw that

the cause of the excitement was a collie dog who had his teeth set in the leg of an unfortunate, and apparently innocent, passer-by."

"What a jolly kind of dog!" interposed Bob. "Oh, Betty, why did you not marry his master?"

"My dear Bob, your tastes and mine are very different. Now, when I heard that shouting crowd, and saw that ill-tempered dog, and my friend trying, by dint of much prodding of his walking-stick, to disentangle dog and man, my first thought was that I had been deceived—the collie was not what my fancy, or rather his fancy, had painted him."

"Well?" questioned Bob, as Betty paused.

"Well, Bob, shortly afterwards he called. 'Miss Stevens,' he said, 'I hope to bring Beppo round tomorrow for you to see him.' 'Thank you, sir,' I replied, severely, 'you need not give yourself the trouble. I have seen him, and he *will not do!*' And with that we parted. But, alas!" concluded Betty, with much simulated grief, "learn from your elder the folly of trusting to appearances. A long time afterwards, when *he* was a married man, I learnt quite casually, from his wife, that the dog I had seen was not his dog at all, but one that belonged to a friend, and that he was only taking him home. When I told her that in consequence of what I had witnessed on that occasion my opinion of Beppo had always been rather poor, she had him sent for, and he came in—the most beautiful collie I have ever seen—so you see——"

"Yes, we see," said Christopher, sarcastically; and

then, with an uplifting of his eyebrows, "jolly for the man that you did take that drive!"

"The 'Infant Prodigy' studies too much; his language is becoming a sort of epitomised tragedy. What do you say, Miss Arbuthnot? But I daresay you cannot turn to consider anything so trifling, after the pitiful story you have just heard?"

Jessie laughed, and then, "You are not a bit like what I expected you to be," she said, suddenly.

"In what way?" asked Betty. "I hope your sister had not given a very terrible account of me?"

"No; only it is alarming to be told people are very clever."

"And a relief to find they are not," put in Mr Stevens, slyly.

"Now that is not fair, father," replied Betty, noting Jessie's rising colour. "You know I always try to be 'ignorant' at tea-time, for the sake of not frightening the children. You all know this amiable trait in my character, do you not?" with a comprehensive glance round the table. "I like my kindness to be appreciated," she remarked, as she got up to lead the way up-stairs. "Will you come, father, she called, a minute later, over the banisters, as she saw Mr Stevens wandering aimlessly about the hall. "Poor father!" as he reached her side, "you are quite lost without mother, are you not? She is in the studio, you remember, but I should think the sitting must be nearly over. It always worries Cyril," she went on, to her guest, "if people go in and out whilst he is painting, so we disturb

him as little as possible. I only hope he will not forget to give your sister a cup of tea."

Jessie did not seem much disturbed by the possibility of her sister pining for her tea. She was not quite at her ease—too young still not to feel a little shy and awkward with strangers, and a little conscious of her own awkwardness.

"What a pretty room!" she exclaimed, as the drawing-room door was opened, by way of making a pleasant remark.

"I am glad you like it," said Betty, good-humouredly; "it is not generally appreciated in the family, but I like it myself."

It was pretty in its way. Untidy, indeed, as nothing pertaining to the Stevens's could well fail to be, but home-like in its very untidiness. A three-windowed room, the pale-green paper on its walls rendering it still lighter—a most necessary precaution in dark, dreary Anne Square. The delicate green made a pleasing background for the pretty out-of-door scenes that hung upon it—scenes that drew one's attention from the dreary world outside to shady lanes and rippling summer seas. And in every possible corner were ferns and flowers; for Nan was a great gardener, and exercised her talent most successfully in these London rooms.

"Why don't the others like it?" questioned Jessie, who was still gazing admiringly about her.

"Oh, because it is not high art; is it, father?"

"Well, my dear, I must say, if you ask me, that I think I should have preferred something softer—more mellow is perhaps what I mean. A darker, softer

green would have been so much more harmonious. Now this room always makes me feel as if I were out in a meadow on a sunny day without an umbrella."

"But, my dear father, is not that just what one wants to feel on a January day in London? I do not deny that your beloved olive-greens may be all very well for a study, say in a large country-house, where one would like to keep one room cool and comfortable-looking to read in."

"Perhaps you are right, Betty."

"What aggravates me on the subject whenever I am reminded of it is, that I do not believe two people out of every ten I meet who rave about high art have the faintest idea of what they mean by the words. To them it is simply represented by olive-green walls with large flat daisies stamped at regular intervals upon it, and a more or less valuable dinner-service hung up thereon instead of pictures."

Jessie, calling to mind the morning-room at 15 Bute Street, held a guilty silence.

"Yes, of course it *is* an affectation," assented Mr Stevens, "but a harmless one, surely, compared with the many that people so often indulge in."

"Is it?" questioned Betty. "I am not so certain."

"Yes; for surely it is advisable to affect to be better than we are than worse. And I, for one, think it is less harmful for girls to pretend that they adore art, and to go in for dressing themselves in artistic colours and in wonderful middle-age costumes, than for them to pretend—for in nine cases out of ten it is equally a pretence—that they care for

nothing but horses and dogs, clothing themselves the while in an ulster and a wideawake hat!"

"Well, I suppose if we must have one or the other——"

"Or something worse, my dear."

"Then I shall leave off complaining."

Very soon after that, Mr Cyril Stevens and Miss Arbuthnot made their appearance, announcing that the sitting was over, and that the carriage was already at the door.

The mere fact of their presence seemed to change Betty; for whereas, before, she had been talking quite pleasantly to Jessie, who had grown confidential in the twilight, now of a sudden she resumed her quick tones and cynical remarks.

"I hope the picture quite repays all the time and care spent upon it, Cyril? Are you satisfied with it, Miss Arbuthnot?"

"Yes; I think it is lovely." And with soft appealing eyes—"Will it require many more sittings, Mr Stevens?"

"Three or four; for it must be made perfect—must it not, after all the trouble I have taken?" This with his dark eyes bent upon her, and a look in them which sent her foolish young heart beating, and told her that in this case trouble was only another name for pleasure.

"Then, good night, Miss Stevens," holding out a small gloved hand. "Why is it that you never come and see me? Come Jessie," and so, with a smile like sunshine to Mr Stevens, swept away with Cyril, leaving Jessie to follow in her wake.

"Will you come with me one day to see Miss Mainwaring?" said Betty suddenly to the latter.

"We might manage it, perhaps, on the occasion of the next sitting. It is a long time since any of us went to tea there."

"I should like it of all things," cried Jessie; "may I indeed?"

"It would be a pleasure," said Betty, courteously. "Do come." And so they parted.

"That is a nice little girl, Betty."

"Yes, an agreeable contrast, I think, to Miss Cicely Arbuthnot."

"You had better take care, Betty. Little pitchers *may* have long ears, but lovelorn gentlemen have longer!"

"Thanks, father, for the warning," replied Betty laughingly.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE GLOAMING.

"We never go to meet, of set purpose, the important things of this life. We turn suddenly round a corner, and come upon them all at once."

It is a dark, blustering night in March—the month having fulfilled so much of the prediction as is contained in the words, "Came in like a lion." The wind is blowing in gusts that threaten to turn umbrellas inside out, and the rain is coming down in torrents. Overhead black clouds are being blown across a blacker sky. Altogether, it is not a night that any one would choose to be abroad in.

And so a small shivering crowd standing on the steps of a church in the neighbourhood of Anne Square seemed to think, for they hesitated, as though loath to quit the comparative shelter of the porch, with the blaze of light which still shone about them, for the wet pavement and driving rain that lay in front. Only one out of the two or three dozen people who had quitted their warm firesides for this evening service did not linger even for a

moment, but, wrapping her cloak tightly about her, sallied forth bravely into the darkness. But then Elizabeth Stevens was never one to hesitate long about anything. If it had to be done, the sooner the better, was the principle on which she acted; so she was very shortly struggling down Anne Street, holding her umbrella close over her head, to serve as a protection against both wind and rain.

The sound of a man's voice repeating her name made her look up. "Miss Stevens!" in a tone of intense surprise, and of annoyed surprise as well; and then, "You ought not to be out alone at this hour of the night."

"Good evening, Mr Elliot; you must excuse my shaking hands with you, but this umbrella is very restive."

"You ought *not* to be out alone," Mr Elliot repeated, unheeding her remark.

"The thing we ought not, still is that we do," quoted, or rather misquoted, Miss Stevens.

"And is that all you have to say to me on the subject?"

"All?" queried Betty, lifting her eyebrows. "What more could I say? I really don't see that I am bound to account to you for my actions, or that it is your business to find fault with them."

"Do you not?" retorted Mr Elliot, angrily. And then changing his tone, in a calmer voice he began, "My wife——" It was not a propitious commencement to his sentence.

"Yes," interrupted Betty, "your wife, I have no doubt, will be perfection; but then it is hardly fair

to compare her with *me*, who am never likely to appear perfect in your eyes! Indeed," under her breath, "I don't much care to be." Betty's eyes were gleaming dangerously behind her spectacles and under the shadow of her large umbrella; but her companion was too absorbed in himself to heed them, or to take warning from the tones of her voice.

"Don't you care? he cried, stopping suddenly short, and looking down at her; "then neither do I! Good-bye," he said, abruptly. "You are a hard-hearted, bitter-tongued woman, Miss Stevens, possessed of neither sympathy nor tenderness, as I said to you once before, and, as I have no doubt, others have told you also."

And so vanished into darkness, leaving Elizabeth struggling alone with her umbrella, and absolutely struck dumb by the suddenness of his arrival and departure. She had only, however, walked the few steps more that brought her in front of No. 39 when she felt a hand on her arm, and Mr Elliot's voice again sounded in her ears, but so changed that she scarcely recognised it as his.

"It *is* good-bye," he said; "I mean what I say by that; but nevertheless we shall meet once more. My future was carved out for me long before I saw you; and now that you have yourself dispelled the dream that I let interfere with my life-work, I shall return to it, and endeavour by sheer force of will to fulfil my allotted task."

"What do you mean?" cried Betty, startled alike out of her anger and her sarcasm.

But she received no answer. The hand that had detained her had relinquished its hold upon her arm, and all she could see, and that only by dint of straining her eyes down the dark street, was a tall figure with bent head, already many yards away, splashing heedlessly through the puddles, utterly careless of the pouring rain. For a second Betty stood irresolutely on the steps despite the wind and rain, and then, with a smile and a shrug of her shoulders, "Well, I cannot run after him," she said, as she pulled the bell.

But when she opened the dining-room door, which was the general resort of the younger members of the Stevens family, there was no shadow of the late encounter on her face.

"Well, children," she said, cheerfully, "and how goes the world here? Has anything unusual occurred since I last saw you?"

"Yes," replied Susy, pleased to be the one to give the piece of news, "Mr Fullerton called directly after dinner, and he has not gone yet."

"Now that is really very interesting, Susy. And I suppose that accounts for your doleful countenances, and for the semi-darkness."

"Yes," said Christopher, who was lying on the hearth-rug with the everlasting Shakespeare spread out before him, "we were quite comfortable in the drawing-room when he came."

"I hope, children, you were all very polite when he did come, and did not mutter, and look cross, because you had to go down-stairs."

"You have guessed it," cried Bob; "that is just

what we did. We all grumbled, and muttered, and looked cross—all of us,” with a complacent smile at the children round the room,” except Jack, who screamed and howled, till Nan had to send for nurse to take him away.”

“Bob, you surprise me. Now the proper thing would have been for you all to have risen up from your several amusements and held out your several hands, each with a pleasant smile, and then have said, ‘You are *very* welcome, Mr Fullerton,’” with a comical imitation of Mr Fullerton’s somewhat affected style of speaking; “‘we are proud and *pleased* to undergo any discomfort; indeed we esteem it an honour, for *your* sake.’ Then if, as is only probable, he had entered into conversation with you, and asked you which was the nicest of your grown-up sisters, you would have replied——”

“Betty,” said Nell, laying a caressing hand on her sister’s.

“No, Nell, that shows you are not so discerning as I should have thought you were. When *Mr Fullerton* asks you that question, if you wish to keep in *his* good graces, you must remember to say ‘Nan.’”

Betty was here interrupted by Nan’s glad voice behind her, and turning round, there stood Nan herself in the doorway.

“Now, Betty,” she cried, “from this day forward all imitations of Mr Fullerton are forbidden in this house.”

“A good reason, Nan, must be given me, if you expect to be obeyed.”

"Well," said Nan, blushing, looking at the multitude of eyes that were all unwinkingly fixed upon her. And then, with a sudden change of tone to one of would-be *nonchalance*, "Do come up to the drawing-room, Betty; I want to show you how wonderfully the begonias have grown."

"Mother's imitation ones?" questioned Betty, with a twinkle in her eyes; but she rose up to follow her sister all the same.

"Has Mr Fullerton gone?" cried the children in chorus. "Then may we go too? It is so dull and dark down here."

"In five minutes by that clock you may go to the drawing-room," said Betty, "if you really think you will be happier there than here. Now, Nan," as the door closed behind them, "as we shall have the avalanche performing the unnatural feat of hurling itself up-stairs in pursuit of us in five minutes, let us deceive it by immediately running up to our own room, and locking ourselves safely in there before it starts. Now," when that retreat was safely gained, "tell me, has it really come to pass? And are you indeed to be the bride of 'Samuel'?"

"Yes, Betty," said Nan, meekly, "and you must not laugh at me, or I do not know what I shall do." And here, much to Betty's surprise, she saw her sister's blue eyes fill with tears.

"My dear Nan," she cried, throwing her arms round her; "my dear, don't cry, I beg of you, or I don't know what I shall do!"

"No, it is not your fault, Betty. Indeed I can-

not tell you why I am crying, for I am perfectly happy."

"For perfect happiness, then, I should think—still you must not let it 'take you in that way,' or you will end by making me miserable."

"But it is dreadful to think of," cried poor Nan, who was still sobbing with her arms round Betty's neck. "Is it not? when we have never been separated in our lives before? And now——"

"Yes, and now you will have to forsake me for 'Samuel.' I beg your pardon if that sounds as if I were laughing at him; but we have called him by that name for so long that it will be difficult to get out of the habit all at once. But a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

Nan had risen now, and was sitting disconsolately in a large arm-chair, still furtively wiping away her tears.

"By what name must I learn to call him, Nan?"

"His first name is John," said Nan, evasively.

"And his second?"

"Drake."

"Then," said Betty, "I think we had certainly better stick to the first and humbler one. But joking apart, tell me, Nan dear, are you really happy?" And Betty knelt down at her sister's feet, and looked earnestly into the pretty face.

"Yes, really, Betty. It may sound strange and untrue, but I have never had even a passing fancy for any one else——"

"I believe you." And Betty rose from her knees with something like a sigh. "Tell me," she went

on, a minute later, "what did the parents say? I should think they were pleased."

"Yes, on the whole I think they were. It took me some time to make mother understand what I was telling her, and still longer to make her realise who the man was to whom I was alluding; but at length she did understand, at least I think she did; then she wept bitterly, and I left father still trying to comfort her."

"Most probably," said Betty, gloomily, "she will congratulate the wrong man. You had better warn Mr Fullerton."

After that, Nan went down-stairs to try and quiet the children, who were uttering alarming cries of mingled anger and despair at finding themselves once more reduced to their own society, and Betty was left alone to take off her wet things, and to think over, if she so wished, the events of the evening. Nan, and her short, sweet romance, that had so swiftly arrived at a happy conclusion, occupied her mind for a long, long time; for to the children, and even to Nan, who was her younger only by three years, Betty had all her life been more of a mother than an elder sister. And it was with something of a mother's pleasure that she saw Nan being taken out of the noisy, overcrowded house, to be cared for, and loved with a good man's love, in a home of her own. But before leaving the room to join the rest of the family below, Betty drew aside the curtains and looked out into the dark, dreary Square.

The wind was still blowing in gusts, the rain

still falling in torrents as it had done when she struggled down Anne Street, and Mr Elliot's voice had stopped her. "What a fool I was!" she said, bitterly. "What on earth induced me to speak to him like that? But it is never of any use my trying to make myself different. As I told Nan some time ago, it is written against me that I can never be civil to any one. But I am *very* sorry," she said, half aloud, as she leaned her forehead against the glass, and her heart ached, as she seemed to see once more the tall figure going down the street, struggling with the storm; but "next time," as she turned away, "I really will behave differently."

She did not remember, it is to be feared, as she said those words, that to some, no next time is ever granted.

If only Elizabeth Stevens could have known the weeks, the months, that would elapse before she should ever see Tom Elliot's face again, and of how they should then meet, her spirits would surely have failed her, and her heart would have ached, far, far more, that stormy March night.

CHAPTER XI.

BIEN ÉCOUTER C'EST PRESQUE RÉPONDRE.

"Of what quality was your love, then?"

"Like a fair house built upon another man's ground, so that I have lost my edifice by mistaking the place where I erected it."

"I FOR one should like Delicia to be asked."

"Oh no, Betty, she would not enjoy it; perhaps she might not like to refuse, and yet I am sure it would be the very last thing in the world she would care about."

"There I differ from you, Cyril. Like most Londoners, I think a day in the country would be a great treat to her, even though spent in the society of such a family as ours! What say you, father? Shall she be asked or not?"

"Who? Miss Mainwaring? Oh, by all means! Now I come to think about it, she is the only person *I* care about who is going. And of course we should each ask some one."

"Yes, certainly," replied Betty, "we must each ask the one whom we love best; and father having chosen—mother, are you not jealous?—we now go on to Cyril, who comes next in point of age."

"Cyril has no choice," interposed Mr Stevens, before his son could reply; "he has already asked Miss Arbuthnot."

"He being disposed of, there are only Nan and myself to be considered, and then we shall be an equal number of men and women, which is always a good thing on such an occasion. Of course we must ask Mr Fullerton?"

"If Nan is agreeable, of course."

And as Nan said nothing, we may conclude she was agreeable.

"And who is No. 8 to be?" questioned Mr Stevens.

"Jessie Arbuthnot," replied Betty, quickly, before any one else had time to speak.

"It ought to be a man," said Nan, quietly—"ought it not, father?" she continued, looking straight at Mr Stevens, heedless of Elizabeth's "not the least necessary."

"Would it not be a good thing to ask Mr Elliot? He is always a pleasant companion."

"Mr Elliot?" repeated Mr Stevens. "Ah, yes; I remember! He has not been here for some time, has he? At least I cannot recall having seen him lately. Yes, ask him, by all means."

"Elliot is not in town," said Cyril, looking over the top of his newspaper. "I called on him the other day, but he has gone, and left no address."

"Gone for good, do you mean?" questioned Nan, in a little pause that followed his speech.

"Yes; so it seems. It is supposed that he is abroad, but no one seems to know much about him."

His sister making no further remark, Cyril returned to the perusal of his paper.

Several minutes passed before Nan dared to lift her eyes from her work, and look towards a distant corner of the room, where, in the rapidly fading twilight of a pleasant evening in May, Betty was putting some finishing touches to a small sketch.

Nan felt relieved when she had cast that furtive glance in the direction of her sister and saw that she was looking just the same as usual, though perhaps she herself could scarcely have told the reason why. No; there was certainly not much apparent need of pity in the appearance of the girl bending over her drawing, the slightest of flushes on her cheeks, her lips parted, as she hummed softly under her breath a little French air as she worked. Ah me! if we could but read each other's hearts, or if we might but reveal that which lies hidden in our own, perhaps then, in that case, Nan would not have returned to her work with that look of relief, and there would have been no peace in her face, no song on the lips of Elizabeth Stevens that night. But this may not be. Fortunately or unfortunately, the thoughts of our hearts are under control, and if we have a secret, it can often, much to our own and others' sorrow, be hidden away beneath the mask of a calm, contented face.

Mr Stevens, senior, having discovered that his wife was not present, had sauntered away in search of her at the conclusion of the conversation; and after his departure the silence remained unbroken for several minutes, until at length Betty said, with-

out lifting her eyes from her sketch, "I think I shall go over and see Miss Mainwaring, and give her the invitation in person. It seems a long time since I was there."

"If you do not care about it, I will go," said Cyril, with more decision in his voice than usual, and laying down his newspaper as he spoke.

"No," Betty replied, with a slight smile, "I do not care very much, for if I do not go to-day, I can to-morrow. But the really important part of the question is, which would Delicia rather receive the visit from—you or me?"

"I do not know what you wish to insinuate by that," said Cyril, moving a step nearer to his sister. "Miss Mainwaring, ever since I knew her, has been one of my greatest friends. I think, indeed, that my friendship with her dates further back than yours!"

"My dear Cyril, I am insinuating nothing. I asked you a plain question, and I suppose I must consider your last ambiguous speech as the answer to it. So go and pay your visit, which has, I fear, been owing a long, long time, and please tell Miss Mainwaring, with my love, that I hope she will come. This message you need only give," went on Betty, as Cyril made no reply, "if she refuses *your* invitation!"

The door shutting somewhat violently was the only intimation Betty received that her words had been heard.

"Why do you plague him so?" Nan asked. "You know he never could bear being teased."

"Because — oh, because," said Betty, "he does annoy me so, sometimes. Five months ago, Nan, you know he was in love with *that* woman," pointing across the Square; "and now"—a shrug of her shoulders completed the sentence.

"Yes; and now, of course, it is easy to be seen that he is in love with some one else; but still, for all that, it is his nature."

"Then he should change his nature, at least if he wishes *me* to have patience with him! But it is not that, Nan—not his being in love that aggravates me; but the fact that he is not—never has been—in love with any one! He does not understand the meaning of the word!"

"But it is scarcely fair to blame him for that," urged Nan. "If he has not the capacity, if he cannot feel powerfully—maybe, after all, it has its advantages—he will suffer less."

"It might be so with some, but not with him, for he will always feel what others feel—or rather what they wish him to feel—and I hate a man who takes colouring from those about him."

"But women do not," Nan replied, sagely. "As a rule, they prefer a man they can influence and guide—a man they can make not only *say*, but *see*, that black is white, if they wish to do so."

"Despicable, Nan! despicable! It makes one wonder whether a man's love is worth having. But of course," on seeing the indignant expression in Nan's blue eyes—"of course there are *men* and *men*!"

"*You* know that as well as I do, I think," said Nan, significantly, as she bent her head once more

over her work ; and Betty said nothing in reply, but put up her drawing in silence. Perhaps—who knows?—there was, as Nan's words suggested, a niche in her heart, where the memory of a certain man was enshrined, much as appearances were against it.

Meanwhile Cyril was making his way, through the dusk of the spring evening, across the Square. He had answered Betty, acting on a certain impulse, which had of a sudden urged him to go and see Miss Mainwaring. Now that he had obeyed the impulse, he was not quite certain that he did not regret it ; and arrived in front of No. 1, he paused before going up the steps, and looked back the way he had come, still undecided how to act. But happening to lift his eyes to the windows of the house he had just left, a remembrance of his sister's amused smile came back to him, and an uncomfortable sensation that perhaps from within the room Betty's keen eyes, behind their blue spectacles, were fixed upon him, noting with enjoyment his evident doubt and hesitation, determined him to proceed ; and with a more decisive air he walked up the steps.

Something of the peace and sense of rest of other times came over him when the door opened, and he found himself going up the well-remembered stairs. Was it really six months since he was almost a daily visitor here ? The time has flown, he thought.

Miss Mainwaring was in the window, making use, like her opposite neighbour, of the last few gleams of daylight, and it was with a countenance

somewhat stirred out of its usual calm that she looked round on hearing her visitor's name.

"Mr Stevens," she repeated, whilst the faintest tinge of colour betrayed that his visit was not entirely an unimportant matter to her.

"Yes, it is I, Miss Mainwaring," said Cyril. "I am afraid it is rather late for a call, but——"

"Please do not apologise," interposed Delicia, in her even voice; "you know of old that I am not often out at this hour." That was the only reminder, if indeed such it could be called, of past days.

And Cyril, noting the words as he sat down in his own particular arm-chair, felt vaguely as the old charm began to work, and he commenced to pour forth the tale of his worries and vexations into the ears of the listener with the sympathetic grey eyes, that somehow he had missed his chance in life. If he had felt a moment's hesitation about coming in, he was thankful now he had not given way to it. This was just what he wanted—what he had been missing of late, though he had scarce known it,—some one who would listen to him, sympathising the while with the anxieties which were at present perplexing him, and in a delicate way make him feel, by the mere fact of sympathy, that he was doing what was right. For such a man, after he has drifted, or has voluntarily placed himself in a certain position, is the very last person who would care to hear, or who would believe it indeed if heard, that the line he had taken up was a wrong one.

But nothing of this had he to fear from Delicia

Mainwaring. She believed in him, and with her belief meant the exclusion of all doubts. So in the fast deepening gloom of this May evening, she sat and listened, just as she had done in the firelight on so many dark November evenings last year, to Cyril Stevens' soft, self-pitying voice.

A voice a little less full of self-pity though than usual, for he *had* accomplished something; for "Engaged" had a place in the Academy, and was one of THE pictures of the year; and having thus planted his feet on the slippery foothold of success, for the time being, Cyril Stevens felt hopeful that it would require but a small effort to keep himself there.

"Yes, it is a beautiful picture," said Delicia, in allusion to it. "I went to the Academy this afternoon on purpose to have a good look at it, and on my return I felt prouder than ever of my acquaintance with the artist."

"Friendship, I hope," said Cyril, softly; "acquaintance is such a very cold word, and it means so little."

"Yes; friendship certainly has a pleasanter sound about it," Delicia acquiesced.

"I have promised to take the two Miss Arbuthnots and their father to the Academy to-morrow," said Cyril, reverting to the subject of the picture. "Indeed Mr Arbuthnot talks of buying it."

"That would be a good thing for you, would it not?"

"I am not quite sure," Cyril replied, absently, "whether I wish to sell it or not."

Miss Mainwaring said nothing in answer to this remark, as it did not seem to call for a reply; and shortly after Mr Stevens rose as if to say "good-bye." But he did not immediately do so; instead, walked over to the window, and looked out on to the promise of summer, as shown forth in the Square garden below.

"Do you remember, Miss Mainwaring," he said slowly, at length, "my once asking you, a long time ago, whether you thought there was anything wrong in a poor man marrying a rich woman?"

A pause.

"I daresay," he went on more quickly, as Delicia did not answer, "that you have forgotten all about it—it was *so* long ago; but I cannot recall your answer—if you gave me one."

"Yes, I remember," Delicia replied; "but I do not think you waited for an answer."

"Well, let me have it now. You know," moving a step nearer, "that I always expect good advice from you."

"That is throwing a great responsibility upon me," she answered, gravely. "As to your question, it is a difficult one to answer in a general sense; for, as a rule, I should think it was *not* a good thing for the wife to have the money. But of course circumstances alter cases."

"Yes?" inquired Cyril, as she paused; "what kind of circumstances?"

"Well, if the woman returned the man's love," Delicia answered, softly, "it would be hard upon her, would it not, if, just because she had money,

the man would not say the words which might have given her happiness as well?"

"Then you would advise the man to speak at any cost—at any risk?"

"I think," said Delicia quietly, turning her eyes towards the window, and away from the dark ones bent upon her, "that a man could scarcely be mistaken—in a girl," after a second's hesitation. "If he loves her, and shows it, her love seems to blossom in the sunshine of his. And there is no reason why she should hide it, is there?" speaking in her usual even tones.

"Thank you, Miss Mainwaring," said Cyril, holding out his hand. "Your advice is just such as I should have expected from you—calm, sensible, and to the point. Good-bye."

"No need to wonder to-night," thought Delicia, as the door closed behind him, "whether it were a theoretical case he was putting, merely for the sake of hearing the arguments for and against it. He is in earnest now. But will that pretty, young, light-hearted girl, with all her little follies and affectations, satisfy him?" was the woman's next thought, as she watched the figure of Cyril Stevens slowly crossing the Square. And she sighed as she watched.

And Cyril Stevens was thinking, as he thus walked slowly homewards, "Did I make the mistake then, or am I making it now? Could I ever have made her love me? But no—she herself says that a woman cannot help betraying her love in some way"—not seeing the line Delicia had drawn between the *woman* and the girl. "And," after a

pause, "she is not one who could ever have been taught. No; love will come to her one day without any teaching; or perhaps," as a new idea struck him, "she has had her story. Any way, she is a restful woman to be near in this life of worry and excitement."

CHAPTER XII.

MISERRIMUS.

"The mother of the Muses, we are taught, is Memory."

"WHO wrote 'Miserrimus,' do you know, Betty?"

It was the afternoon following that on which Cyril Stevens had taken Mr Arbuthnot and his two daughters to see "Engaged" in the Academy, and his mind was even in a more perturbed state than usual, in consequence of a remark that he had overheard whilst there. He had passed on, and was examining another work, when he overheard a man's voice ask, "Who is he?" Something made him aware of the fact, without turning his head, that he himself was the person in question; and he had listened almost unconsciously with a sensation of interest for the answer.

"That?" in a low tone—"oh, that is the brother of the woman who wrote 'Miserrimus.'"

He had turned round then, in the hopes of finding out to whom they had been alluding; but they

had already passed on, and there was no one standing near him who seemed the least likely to have called forth the stranger's question. And in a few minutes he had forgotten all about it; Cicely was by his side, whispering criticisms and opinions into his attentive ears, and the little episode was immediately forgotten.

But it returned to him later on, when, the Arbutnots seen into their carriage, he commenced his lonely homeward walk. And the more he thought of it, the more probability did a certain unpleasant suspicion gain. For to Cyril Stevens, flushed with his first triumph, conscious, though he would not have owned it, even to himself, that there was danger of the triumph not leading to greater things,—there was excessive bitterness in the thought of his not being first. His nature was not a jealous one; he was at once too indolent and too vain for that. It would not often occur to him, and in most instances with right on his side, that he had cause to fear any one standing in his light. His was not a great nature; neither was he a genius, as we said before, but only possessed of a great deal of talent; so that it was not altogether surprising, when it occurred to him for the first time that he might live to find himself known as the brother of Elizabeth Stevens, that the idea was not a pleasant one. Therefore the question which opened this chapter.

"The book is lying on the table," said Elizabeth in reply, "but I do not know that it gives the name of the author."

Mr Stevens took it up, and glanced at the title-page. "No," he said, laying it down again. "Have you read it, Betty?"

"Yes," she answered.

"What do you think of it?"

"I think it is overrated; but you should read it, and judge for yourself."

"Yes, I intend doing so; but I particularly wanted your opinion first."

"I feel flattered. But to change the subject to one less interesting but more important, what answer did Miss Mainwaring give to the invitation? I quite forgot to ask you yesterday."

"Miss Mainwaring," repeated Mr Stevens, meditatively. "To tell the truth, Betty, I forgot your message; but I will go over again."

"I will not try to prevent your making up your arrears of calls, but the invitation really must not be the excuse this time," laughed Betty. "I shall write, for fear of any more mistakes."

"All right. Have you decided on the day?"

"Next Thursday week, if fine."

"Very well. You must let the Arbuthnots know; or stay, I can go over there to-morrow and tell them. That will be better."

"Yes—far better," assented Betty, quietly.

She did not smile, or look up from her book, or give any point whatever to her words; and yet, in some way, they annoyed Cyril. He walked up and down the room once or twice, when 'Miserrimus' seemed to return to his memory, for he took it off the table, and glanced at the opening sentence, and

then, "I think I have guessed the author, Betty," at length he said.

"Have you?" Nan questioned. "Who do you say wrote it?"

"A man or a woman?" Betty asked.

"A woman," replied Cyril.

"There you differ from the other critics, for they all, I think, put it down to a man. And besides," she added, "you have just confessed that you have not read it; so I am afraid you are only differing from others for the sake of differing."

"Well, I will let you know my opinion when I have finished it; but I do not think I shall have any cause to change it."

The book in question had made no small stir in the literary world since its appearance.

The plot was original and striking, and the tale, such as it was, forcibly told. But the strongest point about it was the writing itself, which was very powerful, and suggested that it was the work of a man. This was argued from the fact of the book being divided into two parts—one-half supposed to be written by a man, and the other by a woman. And as it was rare for a woman to write well from the man's point of view, and that part being, if anything, the best written of the two, it had been decided that the writer was of the stronger sex. The plot was peculiar too. The scene was laid in the centre of France, towards the close of the last century. It was the story of an elderly man taking as a bride a young girl whom he had known all her life. It was the old story,

only a new telling of it: she was young, and he was old; and he feared that the love that had grown up round her heart for him was rather that of a fond daughter than of a wife. There are always to be found men, ay, and women too, who will not allow themselves to believe that that for which they long—would indeed give their life to obtain—is theirs already, would they but cease to fear, and instead, believe. And in this particular case there was a cousin, young, winning, and handsome, who had hitherto carried all before him, and who had also fixed his affections upon the convent-bred girl, whose lovely face he had seen and admired.

So much for the preface.

The story itself was told in the history of one year, given first by the husband, and then by the wife. The interest all centred round the point when, after a few weeks of mutual love and happiness, it was decided that the bride should go by a certain coach to visit an old relative who lived a day's journey from her home.

This old aunt being ill and infirm, wrote, beseeching the presence of her niece; and the husband, being unable to go, it was decided she should make the journey alone. So, with many tender farewells and promises of a speedy return, she set forth.

As evening fell, the coach was attacked by a band of masked highwaymen, who, after taking everything that the frightened travellers were possessed of, rode away; and it was only after they had disappeared that it was perceived by them that

the lovely young girl who had borne them company hitherto was no longer with them.

And the girl herself? Terrified and exhausted after a long ride on a fleet horse, which seemed to be ridden by the captain of the band, she found herself in the entrance-hall of an old castle. The man who had lifted her on the saddle before him, and who had supported her fainting form during their long ride, now led her into a great room, dazzling with lights; and amongst the many strangers who crowded round her, the frightened girl recognised her cousin.

In an instant the whole cruel plot was revealed, such details as she did not immediately guess being speedily revealed to her.

She was her cousin's prisoner, and as such she would remain, though treated with much outward honour and courtesy, for a year, unless before the twelve months had elapsed she should agree to become his wife, and forsake for ever the old man to whom she was bound.

At the end of a year, the man who said he loved her told her that she might return.

"You can return," he said, and her heart echoed his words; "but you know best the welcome that will await you when your husband learns under whose roof you have passed the year that you have been separated."

She did not plead for freedom—she felt all prayers would be so hopeless; she did not even give him the satisfaction of knowing that his words had found an echo in her heart.

"He will believe," she said, proudly; "as he has loved, so will he trust!"

And on the germ of hope that those words held for her she lived,—lived through that bitter year; lived through the days when her captor told her that he whom she loved was false to his young wife, even as he believed that she had been false to him; lived through the days when he told her he was dead.

"I do not believe you," she replied; "no doubt can find a place in my heart that loves!" And later on, "He is not dead; he will live until he knows the truth!"

But whilst the wife waited, and lived for the day when she should be free to return to him whom she always pictured waiting their reunion, either in this world or the next, the husband spent the slow months in striving to teach his heart to despise and forget the woman who had been so dear to him—the woman who had sworn, only the morning on which she had left him, that her love was his for ever. And if he could not quite succeed, he yet contrived to erect between himself and her such a barrier of bitter thoughts and feelings that a lifetime would not have been long enough completely to destroy. And whilst she waited and hoped, and he thus strove to forget, the weeks and months crept slowly past, the year slipt away, and in the gloom of a late September evening, outside the gates of the castle—the gates of the home which had been so dear to her—stood a weary woman with white cheeks and dark tearful eyes, which was

what this year of anguish had changed the bright-eyed girl into. And when her knocking was at length heard, and the doors were opened, and it was seen who was without, by one of the startled attendants, into her hand was thrust a packet with her own name written upon it; and on opening it she found within some such words as these—

“If when *he* has abandoned you, as you have abandoned me, you should ever come here seeking forgiveness from me, whose life you made desolate, go forth into the churchyard, and when you have found a stone whereon is engraved the single word ‘*Miserrimus*,’ there kneel and say a prayer for the soul of him who rests beneath, whose heart was broken by your desertion.”

Such was her home-coming; such the fulfilment of her cousin’s words.

His faith had not been as strong as his love, and the want of the one had worked the ruin of the other.

So he had died, and the wife was left to feel that her proud words had been without foundation: “He loves me, therefore he will trust me.” Alas! the belief and the love had been widely separated.

“I cannot understand it,” she sobbed, her cousin’s taunting words echoing in her ears. “As he loved, surely he might have trusted!”

On the spot where the husband had taught himself to distrust the wife,—on the spot where the wife, with tearful, hopeful eyes, and a heart that had faith in undying belief, where love lit up and

pointed out the way, had stood seeking admittance one dreary September evening, was erected a home for the sick and miserable, by one who, through no fault of her own, for ever had to pass her days within the shadow of the Miserrimus.

Such were the outlines of a story, which, with its component parts of love, revenge, belief, and doubt, had made a certain impress on the literary world.

There was something quaint about it, recalling as it did an old-time romaunt rather than a love-story of this prosaic age. And many had been interested in who was the author, and what was his or her age and position.

For some minutes after Cyril had left the room, taking the book with him, Elizabeth sat quite still, thinking deeply, and then rising and going over to Nan's side, with an amused smile, she said, "He has guessed, Nan; or some one has enlightened him; and if *he* knows," with a shrug of her shoulders, "good-bye to seclusion! Why," with a rapid change to Cyril's most mournful manner—"why, dear Miss Arbuthnot, do I not deserve sympathy, for having not only a sister who writes, but one who succeeds? and oh! worse than all—one who does not confide in me! I think *I* merited a little more consideration!"

"For shame, Betty!" said Nan, severely; "you should at least spare your own family."

CHAPTER XIII.

FATE'S IMPERIOUS HOUR.

"Life's dark, stormy weather
Grows to a fairer thing,
When young eyes look together
Through a slender wedding-ring."

THERE was no one in the drawing-room of 15 Bute Street when Mr Stevens was shown into it the following day. "The Miss Arbuthnots were engaged," the butler told him, "but would be down shortly." So Cyril was at liberty to pace up and down, and try *quite* to determine on a step he had almost made up his mind to take.

"Mr Stevens," the servant announced up-stairs to the young ladies of the house; and Gicely, at the words, with a pretty flush, ceased directing and exhorting the dressmaker, which was the business that at present occupied her, and looked with something that was almost like annoyance to the corner where Jessie was seated, for the purpose of giving her advice on the present difficult question with greater ease.

"Would you like me to go down alone?" questioned Jessie, mischievously. "If I do, he is not likely to stay nearly so long, and then I can return, and we can decide about this."

But Cicely made no further reply than "No, no ; I will go down myself," accompanied by a look which suggested that, under the circumstances, Jessie need not trouble herself to accompany her.

But Jessie did not heed the look, and the two sisters went down together.

The room where Cyril Stevens was waiting was not the olive-green room where, one November morning six months ago, Philip Rayton had listened to the strains of "Home, sweet Home ;" but though not the same, it differed only in degree. The dull, grey-green walls did not, however, form such an incongruous background for tall, slight Cyril Stevens, with his nervous restless hands and delicate face, as it had done for broad-shouldered Philip Rayton.

Miss Arbuthnot, too, with her bright head, in her dress of dull peacock-blue, with its puffed sleeves and straight folds that were so rigidly artistic, made a pleasing centre-figure, Cyril Stevens thought ; or, as he himself would have said, she harmonised well with the sad-coloured walls, the Japanese screens and fans, and other eighteenth-century surroundings—harmonised in a way that the sister in white serge, with pale sky-blue ribbons all about it, certainly did not. And if she failed to harmonise with the furniture, just as certainly did she fail with her companions. Not that that fact affected Jessie Arbuthnot much ; indeed it may be questioned whether she

was in the least aware of her delinquencies ; and here, where she was at home, she was not shy, whatever she might be abroad. So she sat down, despite her costume and herself being out of keeping with her surroundings, animate and inanimate, and began to conjure up small talk for Cyril's benefit. Balls, dinners, rides, drives, and various other forms of amusement were talked over and criticised, for Jessie was now "come out," despite the very small show of interest shown by her listener—for Mr Stevens was not fond of young ladies in general, or, in fact, of any woman whose talk was of herself. But he was sustained in his small martyrdom by the consciousness of a graceful figure reclining in a wide arm-chair, and of two dark eyes now and again raised to his, which in those momentary glances said, as plainly as if they had spoken, "I feel for you ; I know what this kind of talk must be to *you* ;" for Miss Arbuthnot had very expressive eyes, and they served her in good stead on occasions, general conversation not being so easy to her as a *tête-à-tête*. And they soothed Cyril, partly by enlarging—if that were possible—his own idea of his sufferings, and partly by the sympathy expressed in them,—for sympathy in one form or another was almost a necessity of his existence.

But it was not decreed that Mr Stevens and Miss Arbuthnot should suffer thus for long, with no prospect of reward. There was a ring at the bell, and enter a servant with a message.

"Mrs White's compliments, and would Miss Jessie like a drive?" And Miss Jessie, to whom all the

sweets of life were still fresh and desirable, rose up willingly, her chatter hushed on the instant.

"You will excuse me, Mr Stevens, I am sure ; and as to you, Cicely, I have no doubt you are quite willing I should have the treat ;" whereat Miss Arbutnot flushed a little guiltily, and then hastily exit the unharmonious element, with its bright, happy, girlish face, and its utterly inartistic arrangement of white serge and sky-blue ribbons, leaving a clear stage to the more serious actors.

For a few minutes after they were left alone neither of them spoke, but at length Cicely broke the silence by saying, as if in apology for her sister's sudden departure, "She is *so* young ;" and she heaved a gentle little sigh as she spoke, which might have been interpreted to mean either pity or envy. Perhaps one great reason why, as a rule, others believed so in Cicely's little affectations was because she believed so in them herself. She did not examine her thoughts, feelings, or motives very deeply, but took them and believed in them just as they came uppermost.

Mr Stevens did not reply, as many a one might have done, that, after all, she was only two years older than this sister whom she thus seemed to speak disparagingly of on account of her age, and that nineteen is not so very old. No ; his sense of the ludicrous, like that of most people much wrapped up in themselves, was very small, and he made answer quite seriously, "She *is* young," in the tone of one willing, if possible, to find extenuating circumstances ; and then, recalling the sympathising eyes

that had helped him to listen to Jessie's small talk, "You must find it trying at times not to have a more congenial companion."

"Yes, indeed," said Cicely, leaning forward, and clasping her hands in that pretty un-English fashion habitual to her; "but then you see we cannot choose our sisters; and Jessie is a good girl at heart," she concluded, magnanimously, "though a little trying sometimes."

Not heeding her latter words, "A companion need not be a *sister*," Mr Stevens said; and then, without waiting an answering word, "Miss Arbuthnot," he said, taking her two hands in his, "there is one who is nearer, dearer, than any sister." He paused, but there was no answer; only the bright head drooped, until the flower-like face was completely hidden. "Cicely, dear," the soft wooing voice went on, "ever since I first saw you—ever since that first evening at Miss Mainwaring's—I think I have loved you, have wished to make you my wife. And now tell me, dear," raising her soft face to his so as to read an answer in her eyes—"tell me, what is my fate to be?"

Small need of words. The answer was written there plainly in the blushing cheeks, in the half-frightened eyes, and Cyril asked no more, but drawing her towards him, pressed his first kiss on the red lips. "Say just once, 'I love you,'" he whispered a few moments later, as he stood with his arm about her, looking down at his newly-won treasure.

"Ah, Cyril, you know I do," she replied, lifting her head and looking at him steadfastly. "If you have admired *me* ever since the first day you saw

me, I think I have loved you always; and I can imagine no greater happiness," she concluded softly, "than that of being your wife," and her voice lingered caressingly over the last words.

"My darling!" Cyril cried, touched by the softened tone and the tender words, "I pray that you may always think so. We will try, Cicely, what a grand and beautiful thing we can make of life *together*."

And so with joyful pride on his part, and clinging girlish tenderness on hers—all her little mannerisms and affectations for once thrown aside—they parted: he to return with a lightened heart to Anne Square—lightened partly by the thought that come what might of it, the deed was done, and his future decided for him; and she to await in anxiety her father's return.

Miss Stevens and her sister were both in the drawing-room when Cyril returned from his visit to Bute Street.

"Well, Cyril," Betty asked, inquiringly, "will Thursday suit her, because we really ought to begin to make our arrangements?"

"I am very sorry, Betty," replied Mr Stevens, apologetically, "but I really quite forgot to ask her."

"What a useful messenger you are!" Betty laughed. "Yesterday I sent you to Miss Mainwaring on important business, and then your conversation was of such an interesting nature that you forgot what you went for; and to-day you go to quite a different place, and I suppose the same excuse holds good!"

In an instant that little line that his sisters knew

so well straightened itself out across Cyril's forehead.

"I do not understand what you mean by your insinuations about Miss Mainwaring."

"An evil conscience," Betty interposed, under her breath, "for I have insinuated nothing."

"As to Cicely Arbuthnot——"

And then, without one word more, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room, expressing his feelings merely by the way in which he slammed the door after him.

"Cicely?" repeated Miss Stevens, interrogatively, looking towards her sister, and nodding her head as she spoke.

"Oh, Betty, do you really think so?" asked Nan.

"Yes, Nan. What with the crossness, and the Cicely, and the slamming of the door, I should say there is not a doubt of it. In the halls of our ancestors the artful Cicely will shortly reign. Alas for my prophetic soul!"

"I wish he had told us," said affectionate little Nan; "however, I daresay he will to-morrow."

"Never fear, Nan; to-morrow the state visit will be paid, and we shall be told all about it, and be called upon to sympathise."

"And with which of the two will you sympathise, Betty?" and Nan laughed.

"That is a difficult question to answer," replied Betty, taking off her glasses; "but looking into the future in my present prophetic manner, and considering at the same time my intimate acquaintance with Cyril in the past, I should say, strange

as it may appear, that a great deal of sympathy may yet safely be reserved for Cicely Arbuthnot!"

Late on the evening of the same day Jessie Arbuthnot was awoke out of her sleep, as she had been once before, and not so very long ago either, by a white figure entering her room: "Jessie, wake up!" it cried, throwing itself on its knees by the bedside.

"Is that you?" questioned Jessie, sleepily.

"Yes, it is I, Cicely. Oh, Jessie, do wake up!" as Jessie showed unmistakable signs of dropping off to sleep again; "I must tell you."

"Well?"

"Father has come back, and has said 'Yes;' and oh, dear Jessie, I was so happy that I could not go to bed without telling some one!"

"I'm so glad," said Jessie; and she kissed her sister affectionately; "at least, I mean if you are glad I'm glad. But don't you think," began Jessie, who was now wide awake.

"No; I think nothing that begins with 'but,'" interrupted Cicely, rising from her knees. "Good night;" and motherless Cicely went back to her own room disappointed—chilled; for it is disappointing, especially when we are young, to make a great step in life, to experience some, what is to us great joy or sorrow, and to have no one to whose ready sympathy we may turn, knowing of a certainty they will surely be glad or sorry with us.

CHAPTER XIV.

I THAT LOVED, AND YOU THAT LIKED.

“Woman,—and still the sad burden is woman.”

“YES; Miss Mainwaring was at home, and disengaged, and would be very glad to see Miss Stevens.”

So Miss Stevens passed from the dusky world outside, into the lighted hall, where a man had once paused to admire a bright head and a pair of brown eyes that he had now won for his own; up the steep, old-fashioned stairs, and into the drawing-room, where was seated the calm, beautiful woman, whose love he had first desired, in the days before Cicely Arbuthnot bewitched him, and stole away his heart.

“I must apologise for calling at such an hour,” said Elizabeth, holding out her hand—“nine o’clock! But really, I think it is time the final arrangements were made about Thursday; and in the present state of the household, I can prevail upon no one to listen to the practical part of a picnic—namely, the food. No; at present it is all love, and green

trees, and the—what I should call—et-cetera part of it.”

Miss Mainwaring smiled. “Dear Miss Stevens, please do not make excuses for coming to cheer up my loneliness. I am really so glad to see you. We will have a cup of tea, and you will find me a most reasonable person; and between us, I think we shall arrange everything to our mutual satisfaction.”

“That sounds restful,” said Elizabeth; “now I am going to take off my hat, and make myself quite at home, as you see, and then, with a sheet of paper and a pencil, I daresay I shall be able to make out a list of what we shall require. It is a great help to thought to have no children running in and out and disturbing me with suggestions.”

Miss Mainwaring placed paper and pencil before her friend in silence.

“Nan used to do all these things,” Betty said, as she began to write; “but since she was engaged!” and Betty shrugged her shoulders.

“Yes, it must be rather a trial for you,” assented Miss Mainwaring. “You used to be so much together, and however fond a girl may be of her sister, it is impossible to prevent, once she is engaged, the man coming between them.”

“I believe,” said Betty, as she began her list, “if Mr Fullerton did not call every morning and say Nan might eat her dinner, if she liked, she would starve! But as every one else is so preoccupied at present with these weighty matters, it devolves upon me to see that they have enough to eat and drink.”

"And Burnham Beeches has been quite decided upon as the place of the festivity?"

"Yes; I think so. And do you really mean to come with us?" Elizabeth went on, her head bent over her paper. "I warn you that you will not like it. No one except noisy children—and lovers," with a little laugh, that was meant to be easy and natural, but somehow failed in its intention.

"Yes," Delicia replied, in her even voice; but she also did not look up. "Even children and lovers do not make me wish to change my mind, for I think it will be a pleasant day—and you and I will be companions for one another."

"Yes," Betty replied, with something almost like bitterness in the tones of her voice; "you and I seem to be left out of it all, do we not?"

Delicia did not reply, but her eyes followed Betty, who, after speaking, had left her seat and walked over to the window.

The tone of her voice surprised Miss Mainwaring, for Elizabeth was sarcastic, amusing, sharp, what you will, at times, but it was rare to hear her say anything that could be termed ill-tempered or bitter. Her face was half turned towards the window, and Miss Mainwaring wondered whether it was fancy on her part that the lines of it were sharper than they used to be, and that in the eyes, at present not hidden behind spectacles, was a look which told of anxiety—sorrow of some sort.

Something in her appearance as she stood thus reminded Miss Mainwaring of Cyril, and for this cause awakened her sympathies. "Miss Stevens,"

she said, an unwonted tenderness in her voice, "you are not looking well. I am afraid all these changes at home have been worrying you?"

"Yes; love-making, to the looker-on, at least, is most uninteresting," Betty replied, with a resumption of her usual manner; "but as it is the way of the world, we must, I suppose, make the best of it."

One might as well try to show sympathy to a porcupine, as to Elizabeth Stevens. And when the person who would fain have bridged across the quick speech and sharp retort, which served as a barrier between her and the hearts of others, was such a one as reserved Delicia Mainwaring, the chances in her favour, at first sight, would appear but small.

After that Betty put on her spectacles, and the two ladies talked business and made lists of the necessary provisions for the forthcoming excursion.

"We shall go by train to —, and then drive the rest of the way; that is the present idea."

"And how many will go out of your house?" questioned Miss Mainwaring.

"We four elders, and all the children, whom I cannot prevail to stay at home by bribes or threats. There will only be the two Arbuthnots and yourself in addition, and father to chaperon us all. I have not asked any one else, as the children of course expect to be amused, seeing that the expedition is supposed to be in their honour; and, judging by my present experience of lovers, we may put four 'grown-ups' aside from doing their fair share of the work. Amongst many other privileges atten-

dant on being engaged, I think may be counted that of never doing anything one does not wish to do!"

"Well, that does not often happen in life," Miss Mainwaring remarked; "so it is not astonishing that when it does, people should make the most of it."

"Do you think that is generally our own fault—I mean, not obtaining what we want; or the fault of other people, or circumstances over which we have no control?"

"I think it is very often our own fault, our own mistake, perhaps," Miss Mainwaring replied. "But after all," she went on, in a lower voice, "unless we have determinately brought about our own failure, I think it is safer, and happier too, to trust that our wishes have been denied us by One who, seeing farther than we can do, perhaps knows that if we did possess that for which we long, it would only disappoint us, and that it is therefore withheld in pity."

"But if we *do* determinately bring about our own failure?"

"Ah! of course, that is sad. But don't you think more often than doing that, people make just a little mistake here or there, which is so easy to see on looking back, but which at the time seemed but of small importance, and yet in the end it was this very little mistake that caused the failure?"

"Yes, perhaps so. It is more soothing to one's self to think it, at any rate."

"It is so easy to see the mistakes we made, on looking back," continued Miss Mainwaring, "and

so difficult to judge ourselves fairly after it is all over."

Elizabeth had taken off her spectacles again, and was leaning forward in her chair, with her dark eyes bent upon her companion's fair head and down-cast eyes—for Delicia was speaking, more as if pursuing a train of thought in her own mind, than taking part in a conversation.

"One is apt to be too lenient?" questioned Betty.

"On the contrary, I think when it is ourselves we are judging, we are often apt to be too hard. It is justice without mercy then."

"No, I disagree with you," said Betty, almost defiantly. "We know ourselves, and if we recognise our own folly, let us also recognise that we deserve no mercy for it, and judge ourselves accordingly."

"Do you think so, Miss Stevens? Don't you think we should rather try to discriminate, disentangling our faults from our follies, and try to remember, even when we ourselves are the prisoner at the bar, that there is no great merit in meting out bare justice? Our own hearts," concluded Delicia, "especially when we are angry with them, are very apt to deceive us."

"And you think they ought to have the benefit of any little doubt there may be," said Betty, with an attempt at her ordinary tone, and moving nearer to Miss Mainwaring as she spoke. "Thank you—Delicia. May I call you Delicia? My erratic mind feels quite soothed by your calm common-sense, and I am therefore obliged to you."

"Is that a reproof?" questioned Delicia, with a smile. "I fear I am terribly matter of fact; there is not a particle of romance about me."

"Well, you are saved a great deal of trouble. Not that I believe you altogether, for I do not think there lives a woman who would not sacrifice herself for a totally unworthy object if she only had the chance, which it seems to me is only another reading of the same word."

Here the conversation was brought to a termination by a servant announcing that Mr Stevens was below, and that he had come across to call for Miss Stevens.

"Ask him to come up," Miss Mainwaring said; and then turning to Betty, "I am always so glad to see your father; he is a great friend of mine."

"Then it will be a satisfaction to you to know that the sentiment is reciprocated, for he is always telling us that he thinks there is no one like you."

But after all, when the door did open, it was not Mr Stevens' grey head and stooping shoulders that made their appearance, but the tall, slight figure of his son.

Betty's "Cyril!" indicative of intense surprise, and Miss Mainwaring's "Mr Cyril!" with a note of exclamation after it, were both greetings of a nature to describe astonishment rather than welcome, and this Cyril was not slow to perceive, as he stood passing his hand restlessly through his hair, and saying a few words in a nervous tone of voice to account for his appearance.

But Miss Mainwaring's well-bred calm rarely

deserted her for long. "It was good of you to come, Mr Stevens," holding out her hand, "for it is too dark for Miss Stevens to go home alone, and she is always angry if I send a servant."

"Yes, I hate the feeling of being pursued that a man six feet high, following at the distance of a few yards, with his eyes fixed on the back of my head, gives me."

It is never a very comfortable position for a man to find himself obliged to tell one woman, for whom he has had a *tendresse*, that he is about to marry another; and the situation is certainly not rendered any pleasanter by the knowledge that a spectator of both the first and second act is looking on, watching how he conducts himself. The chances are ten to one that if Cyril had met Miss Mainwaring for the first time since his engagement alone, his tone would have been slightly self-pitying—not for any particular reason; for even if in the depths of his own heart there were faint doubts of ultimate happiness, yet he was honestly in love, and would not, if he could, have changed his prospects for those of any one else. But his tones would have been anything but buoyant nevertheless; and Delicia, scarcely knowing wherefore, would have let "Courage" be her battle-cry, and Cyril would have once more indulged in the luxury of resting against his moral prop. But all this could not be, with his sister watching him.

But between Delicia's well-bred calm, and Cyril's ease of manner—for he rarely betrayed for long that he was nervous, whatever he might feel—matters

soon arranged themselves, and the amused gleam faded out of Elizabeth's eyes.

"I believe I have to offer you my congratulations," Miss Mainwaring said, and she said it without the slightest constraint in her voice. For Delicia, we must remember, was not a romantic girl but a sensible woman (for sensible, pray do not read strong-minded), and she did not know that Cyril had ever regarded her in any other light than that of a friend; but had decided long ago that, as was only natural, in days before he loved, his friend had been dearer to him than when the face of the younger, fairer woman was always before him, telling him how far, far greater than any friendship is Love.

All this lesson Delicia had been conning and learning by heart for many months now, and the result was that with a calm face, and a true wish at her heart for his future happiness, she could offer her congratulations.

The visit was not a very long one. Elizabeth only allowed of her brother thanking Miss Mainwaring for her good wishes, when she began to suggest that it was late, and time they were thinking of returning home,—and Cyril was not slow to take the hint. If Miss Mainwaring had been alone he would like to have stayed, he thought; but under the circumstances—namely, under the surveillance of Betty's keen eyes and blue spectacles—it might be as well to depart. So the brother and sister shook hands with their hostess, and with many thanks from Betty for the quiet room where she had been able to collect her scattered wits, and re-

member what was necessary for a picnic, they said good night.

Cyril lit a cigar directly the door of No. 1 was closed behind them, and the two then strolled in utter silence across the Square, to their own house. It was only when they had reached that point that Betty said, in the tone of one soliloquising, "I wish Christopher were grown up!"

"Why?" asked Cyril, with his hand on the bell.

"Why? oh, because he is such a clever child and studies his Shakespeare so much, wherein is supposed to be contained more wisdom than in most books, so that it may fairly be supposed that *if* he were only grown up——"

"Well?" inquired Cyril again, as Betty paused, and the door was opened to admit them.

"He would have married Delicia Mainwaring!"

CHAPTER XV.

"FAIR THOUGHTS AND HAPPY HOURS."

"When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,
The mother of months in meadow or plain,
Fills the shadows and windy places
With lip of leaves and ripple of rain."

BURNHAM BEECHES on a lovely June morning! there are few pleasanter places within easy reach of London. Overhead a cloudless summer sky, which seemed to offer every promise of a long, fine day to the pleasure-seekers below. These latter were at present engaged in unpacking hampers, uncorking wine, and all the other thousand and one prosaic employments which precede an *al fresco* dinner when there are no servants, and every one experiences the pleasure and the pain of waiting upon himself. But at length all is settled to every one's satisfaction, and Betty's voice is heard calling upon the idlers to come and partake of the feast that the workers have prepared. At Betty's call, and the more energetic shouts of the children, the couples who had wandered far away from the scene of toil appeared in sight.

Such a pretty scene as it was, too, with the sun-

light flickering down through the young green leaves overhead on to Elizabeth Stevens' graceful form, enthroned on a heap of moss that the children had arranged for her at their end of the *soi-disant* table, on Delicia Mainwaring's earnest grey eyes, on Cyril's dark face, and Cicely's bronzed hair; and in the distance, as if loath to quit the shadow of the trees and return to the world of men, on the figures of sweet, blue-eyed Nan Stevens and her lover. It was a romance of the Decameron,—a picture of Arcadia,—only somewhat marred by the most unromantic appearance of the many children—Betty's bribes apparently not having been very successful; and in addition to a good many scions of the house of Stevens, there were three young Arbuthnots—embryo Cicelys, as Betty averred in confidence to Nan, judging by the way they all struggled and fought to sit next Christopher at lunch. Every one looked happy—every one spoke as though there were no such thing as sorrow; but then it is to be feared that in this world of shams and unrealities it is not permitted to the actors to leave their parts undone, to omit their smiles and jests, and leave their light words unsaid, and speak from their hearts of the things which are verily of interest to them,—even though the audience be but a small handful in the pit, or the galleries, scarcely of sufficient number to pay for the lights which shine and illuminate the spot where the performers strut back and forth, with laughing words and tired eyes.

“Have you read ‘Miserrimus,’ Mr Stevens?” Delicia asked presently, by way of making a little

conversation, in the hopes that she would thus prevent herself from listening to that low-pitched voice, the echoes of which she knew so well. "But of course you have," bringing herself and her straying thoughts to attention with a slight effort.

"Oh yes; I read it some time ago. But tell me your opinion of it. Do you go with the reviews or not? Was it written by a man or a woman?"

"I am of opinion——" here interposed Cyril's voice.

"Wait a moment, Cyril," said Mr Stevens. "I wish to hear what Miss Mainwaring has to say first; women often make sharper guesses at these things than we do."

Delicia blushed slightly at finding every one listening for her words: even Betty had paused in her conversation with Jessie, and was leaning forward awaiting them.

"My opinion is," she said, after a second's pause, looking at Mr Stevens, senior, as she spoke, "that it was written by a most unhappy woman."

The reply was apparently unexpected, for Mr Stevens made no answer; neither did any one else speak; and it was Cyril who at length broke the silence.

"Then, Miss Mainwaring," he said, "if your guess be a correct one, Elizabeth Stevens is, to use your own words, a most unhappy woman!"

Delicia turned towards him in utter astonishment.

"I was going to say," in answer to that look, "when my father interrupted me, that I had already

guessed the author, and I am almost positive that my guess is a right one."

No one spoke, but in silence all eyes were turned towards Betty, as if to see whether this were true, written on her face.

"I am going to draw down my veil," she said, as she went on composedly eating salad, "for I am certain that I am just going to blush! Quick, Nell! hand me my spectacles; perhaps if I had them on I should not so much mind being the cynosure of all eyes!"

And then Nan's voice broke in—

"Cyril *was* clever, though, for he guessed all this before he read the book. He told us so some nights ago."

Miss Mainwaring and Mr Stevens both laughed. This latter seemed much amused at the turn affairs had taken; but Nan, recognising in Cyril's words a preconceived plan of revenge for Betty's teasing, was indignant.

Without heeding Nan, Cyril went on—

"Now, Betty, you cannot get out of answering. Father, tell her she *is* to answer."

"That is a weak sentence," interposed Betty, with her blue spectacles fixed unwaveringly on his face.

"You are suspected—now clear yourself."

And in the depths of Cyril's heart, it is to be feared, he trusted, at the expense of proving himself wrong, that she would clear herself.

"I throw myself upon the mercy of the court, and more especially upon that of Mr Cyril Stevens."

"Well, I think you have behaved very meanly," Cyril remarked, after a moment's pause, "in not trusting any of us; don't you, father?"

"The prisoner at the bar," said Betty, "would like to say a few words in her own defence—not having any one to say them for her. I may have been mean," in a self-depreciatory voice, "as you so harshly, but no doubt justly, observe; but I have not been as mean as you seem to fear—I did trust some members of my family."

"Who were they?" asked Cyril, sharply.

It was on the tip of Betty's tongue to say, "Those who were worthy of trust," but chancing to look at Cicely's flower-like face, with its soft, loving eyes, she restrained herself. "Father and Nan," she replied. And then, without giving him time to answer, she turned to Miss Mainwaring. "You must tell me, now," she said, "that my secret has oozed out, what made you make that remark about the author just now?"

"I really do not know. That was the conclusion to which I came last night, when I finished it."

"But now that you know the author," said Mr Stevens, with a laugh, "to be Betty, you will be obliged to change your mind."

"No, I cannot do that," Delicia replied, in a lower voice; "but of course one is always liable to be mistaken."

"Betty," said Christopher, who had been gazing at his sister open-mouthed for some time, "then is it really true?"

"It is."

"How awfully clever you must be!"

"I am. I only wonder you never found it out before."

"And did you get much money for it?" inquired practical Susy.

"Some, you avaricious child."

"Well, I think, then," said Christopher, gravely, "that you ought to give us each a present."

"Perhaps you are right, Christopher. I had myself overlooked that side of the question. See what one gains by studying Shakespeare night and day! Well, Susy, I see in your speaking eye that you have a wish very near your heart; what is it?"

"I should like a locket," said Susy immediately, with a side glance of admiration at an ornament of that description which hung round the neck of the youngest Miss Arbuthnot.

"That is a happy thought, Susy. I shall buy several lockets, with 'Miserrimus' engraved upon them, and give you each one. The general effect, you see, will be bride-like—silver lockets with monograms, the gift of the bridegroom. And it will be as well thus to take time by the forelock, as I think it highly improbable I shall ever attain any nearer than that to being the principal object at a wedding!"

"You are talking, Betty," interrupted Christopher, severely, "but I do not see what I am to have. I am not going to be put off with a locket."

"I should like to have twenty-four hours, Christopher, to consider the subject in."

The "grown-ups," as Betty designated them, at

the other end, were not nearly so talkative as Miss Stevens and the children. Neither Cyril nor Miss Arbuthnot had much to say to any one else; and Nan, seated between her father and Mr Fullerton, devoted most of her conversation to the latter. Miss Mainwaring, since Cyril's disclosure, had not spoken, but was apparently buried in thought; and Mr Stevens did not disturb her, partly because she was a woman who inspired all men with the sense of rest that any one gives who never requires to be amused by intellectual fireworks or silly chatter simply for the sake of talking, and partly because his chief idea of a holiday was to rest his eyes on green trees and soft white-clouded skies without let or hindrance. So that when Betty ceased speaking, it was evident to every one the silence that had fallen upon the company.

"Will you come for a little walk?" Cyril inquired of his companion; and love-making being still too new for either of them to have tired of it, Cicely gladly acquiesced, and the two, rising, sauntered away under the shade of the beeches.

Nan rose too, but only to move round to Betty's side.

"Are you sorry?" she asked, in a low tone.

"Oh no," Betty replied, and the two walked a few steps away from the others. "I knew *that* night, when he began showing that marvellous interest in it, without having read it, that he had got hold of the clue."

"He planned nicely, did he not, to make a sensation to-day?"

“He did, Nan; but,” with a wicked little laugh, “it was rather a case of the ‘*Coup Manqué*,’ or the ‘Tables Turned,’ was it not? But do my eyes deceive me? My spectacles to the rescue! and in the meantime, Nan, pray be the ‘very eyes of me,’ and tell me, do I see our brother walking *alone* towards me, and in the shadows behind, his own—his very own—conversing with another? Ah, Cyril,” as he reached her side, and Nan seized the opportunity to wander towards where a man’s figure was awaiting her in the distance, “how anxious you make me! What has happened?” with clasped hands. “Is it already a case of pistols for two, and coffee for one?”

“Don’t be nonsensical, Betty, but,” smiling as he spoke,—for Cyril, as a rule, was not ill-tempered, did not even much mind being laughed at, especially by Betty, so long as the laugh was not directed against any very weak point,—“Cicely has met a friend—Rayton, I think, is his name—and as he stopped and spoke to her, I thought I would stroll on and leave them, as, in each and every case, two is company, &c.”

“Thus displaying the most marvellous want of jealousy,” murmured Betty, with her eyes on the ground.

Not heeding her: “He seems to be alone,” Cyril went on; “so I thought, perhaps you might ask him if he would like a cup of tea with us presently.”

“Yes, certainly; tell Cicely to ask him,” and Betty prepared to return to where Miss Mainwaring and Jessie were seated, beneath the shadow of

a great tree ; Mr Stevens stretched at their feet, thinking, to take his word for it—sleeping, to take theirs.

“Wait a minute,” said Cyril, laying his hand on her arm ; “why did you make so much mystery about being the author of that book ?”

“I think it is more interesting to be anonymous, one hears so many more free opinions ; and besides, a book has never such a fair judgment passed upon it if it is known before it is read that it was written by a woman. Men are sadly prejudiced in favour of their own sex.”

“But why did you leave *me* out ? Why was I not told, as well as the others ?”

“I only told father and Nan,” Betty replied, evasively.

“Who else was there ? mother, the children, and myself ? I think *I* need not have been left in the dark.”

“Ah, but you see,” said Betty, cheerfully, “I wanted the secret kept, at any rate, at first ; and you are far too sympathetic—with ladies—to be a good keeper of secrets.”

Mr Stevens was not quite certain whether to be pleased or vexed at his sister’s speech. She spoke quite pleasantly, but he was not sure that there was not a sting in her words somewhere, if he could only have laid hold of it ; but whilst he was meditating over them, Betty slipped away, and joined the others.

“Your sister has found a friend, Jessie, in the depths of the forest,” she said, sinking down on to

the soft moss by Miss Mainwaring's side. "A Mr Rayton."

"Not Philip Rayton?" exclaimed Jessie, starting up in her astonishment; "not Philip Rayton? Why, he is in India."

"Then that settles the question," Betty remarked, "or else this man, who answers to the name, has murdered that man in some far-off Indian jungle, and has now come hither, probably disguised in that man's clothes, to impose upon those who knew him in the flesh. But speak of an angel—and here he comes!"

But there was no deception. The man who was approaching with Miss Arbuthnot was in truth none other than Philip Rayton. And without the slightest apparent nervousness or awkwardness, Cicely was talking to him. Not the faintest shadow of that last parting seemed to make itself remembered; it is in truth to be doubted whether she thought very much about it; and if it came to her remembrance at all, it was probably only as a dim and distant *fiasco*, which had occurred in the days of her youth, before love had overtaken her, and shown her what life might be. Such is the power of self-deception.

So Cicely drew nearer to the group beneath the trees, who were all watching her with somewhat of interest, easy laughing words on her tongue, and a smile on her lips. She introduced Mr Rayton to Mr Stevens, who, at the sound of her voice, started up from where he had been lying buried in thought (or sleep); and in this manner, having done all that

politeness could demand of her, she slipped round to the side where Cyril stood, and presumably took up her conversation with him at the very point where it had been interrupted by the appearance of Philip Rayton in the shadow of the beeches.

But Jessie's young and girlish curiosity was not thus easily to be repressed.

"Why, Mr Rayton," she exclaimed, "where have you sprung from? Have you really returned from India already?"

"From India!" repeated Mr Rayton, in a slightly surprised voice; "dear me, no!" And then changing his tone,— "Ah no! After all, I never went to India—which was a piece of good luck, if I deserved, I certainly did not expect."

"And do you mean to say," Jessie continued, in a slightly aggrieved voice, "that you have been all these months in London, and never came once to see us,—not even to tell us of the good luck that had befallen you?"

"Well, Miss Jessie, it *was* neglectful, I own it; and hope, as I have so fully confessed, I shall be forgiven. My only excuse is that I have really taken to working hard of late. In fact, there has been no choice for me in the matter,—my holiday had been too long as it was."

At Mr Rayton's words, spoken in his usual pleasant voice, with just that ring in it that only a life which has known the rough as well as the smooth teaches, Cicely did colour; and the eyes fixed on Cyril did waver away for an instant to the dark,

earnest face bent on her sisters. But it was only for a minute.

"Take me for a little walk, Cyril," she whispered; "there will just be time before lighting the fire for tea." And Cyril, only too glad, sauntered away by her side.

"Come, Jessie," Betty cried at the same moment, "we will go and look for sticks to make a fire, for I am longing for a cup of tea. Mr Rayton, you will stay and have one, will you not? I hope you are not particular, as the water is sure to be smoked."

"I like it," Mr Rayton replied, philosophically. "Could I be of any use, for I am quite willing to help?"

"No, thank you. Don't think me ungracious, but I always find that if men and women work together, the women do all the work, and the men talk most afterwards, and get all the praise; so I think Jessie and I prefer that no one should rob us of our laurels. Perhaps in the meantime you will stay and take care of Miss Mainwaring; for," lowering her voice to a stage whisper, and looking towards Mr Stevens, who had moved away to the shelter of the next tree, "father, who ought to be amusing her, is asleep."

"No, Betty," Mr Stevens replied, without moving, "I am only thinking."

"Only thinking," amended Betty, "and therefore not an amusing companion. Good-bye for the present."

For a second after seating himself by Delicia's side, Mr Rayton let his eyes follow the tall, slight figure of Cyril Stevens and that of the slender girl in the dress of dull peacock blue, which harmonised just as well with the young green of the trees, and the flickering sun's rays, that glinted through the thick foliage overhead, and turned to gold the red brown hair, as it had done with the olive walls, Japanese fans, and quaint dragon china, in 15 Bute Street.

"They are engaged, then?" he said, as if the words escaped him almost without thought.

"Yes," Delicia quietly replied; "they are engaged." And then she lifted her eyes from some needlework she had been idling over, and looked up with interest to see what manner of man this Philip Rayton might be, of whom in the old time she used to hear so much.

At the same moment his eyes quitted the two figures, which were fast disappearing from sight, and rested on the woman by his side.

"Then,—you are Delicia Mainwaring!" he exclaimed in a surprised voice; but immediately added, "I beg your pardon, but at one time I used to hear so much about you, that I feel as if I knew you. I recognised you directly from the descriptions I have had."

"From Cicely?"

"Yes; from Miss Arbuthnot. I used to see her very often last autumn, and hear a great deal of you and the Stevens's. And now—it is curious to meet her again under these circumstances."

"How was it you did not go to India? I heard from her, or Jessie, that you had started."

"Yes; I did go to see them, and wished them good-bye, and I thought at the time that it would be many years before I saw England again; but the English partner of our house died suddenly, and it was decided that I should remain in London."

"And you were glad?" Delicia questioned.

"Yes; I have roamed about too much to like travelling just for its own sake."

"And yet I sometimes think a man's life must be a pleasant one, just because he can go about with no one to consult but himself."

"For a time it is pleasant," he answered, "to be able to wander as one likes, with no one to question us; but after a time, as one grows older, I think that is just what one wants. I know"—with a laugh—"that I have sometimes thought I should like a wife, even a disagreeable one, who asked me every time I came in where I had been and what I had done, rather than have no one to care in the least." He laughed quite cheerfully as he spoke, which took away any tinge of sentiment from his speech that it might otherwise have had.

And Delicia smiled too, and then somewhat irrelevantly remarked, her thoughts having flown from his last speech to many random words let fall by Cicely last year—"How is it that you have not seen anything of the Arbuthnots all the winter? I assure you they did not forget you, even after they thought you had sailed for India; they often

spoke of you—at least,” she added, feeling her words were not quite truthful, “Jessie did.”

“Ah,” he said, absently, digging up a little piece of moss with his stick as he spoke, “she is a nice girl, Jessie Arbuthnot,” which Delicia interpreted, unimaginative as she usually was about her neighbours’ affairs, into: “So Cicely refused him; I wonder why, for at that time——” But she did not care to pursue her thoughts further, for at that time she herself had been dreaming a dream which had since vanished away: so, was she the one to wonder at the dreams of others?

After that topics did not fail them. Mr Rayton talked and Miss Mainwaring listened, but it was not the one-sided listening expected and enforced by Cyril Stevens.

No: Delicia found herself talking of Anne Square, and the old house where she lived alone; of the Stevens’s, who had been such good friends to her, and had done their best to enliven many lonely hours for her. She was quite surprised when at length Miss Stevens and Jessie reappeared, to hear the former say, “I hope you are prepared with any amount of praise, whether the tea is good or bad, now that you see it has taken us a whole hour to prepare it.”

“Dear Miss Stevens,” said Delicia, rising to her feet and blushing, she hardly knew why, “I am quite ashamed of myself. Why, if I had been asked, I should have said you had not been gone more than ten minutes!”

Jessie was the only one who smiled at Delicia’s

innocent, tale-telling, little speech, which might have fallen from the lips of a girl of fifteen.

Mr Rayton said calmly, "The time always flies when one is talking of Art; and from various pictures, including 'Engaged,' we descended to the discussion of a sketch I have been taking to-day." And then he turned away from Miss Mainwaring and her friend, and began talking to Jessie.

"Father still asleep—or thinking, I should say," Betty remarked. "Well, I have not the heart to disturb him. Come, Miss Mainwaring, let us go and look for the others first."

Elizabeth Stevens was quite a lady at heart, though she might be a little brusque in manner and speech at times, as was surely evinced now, for she had a rare perception of the ludicrous, and she *had* been amused just now by Miss Mainwaring's unsophisticated speech; but not the faintest shadow of a smile had crossed her face—not even a look that by any one much more observant of others than was Delicia, could by any possibility have been construed into allowing that there was anything to smile at. And yet she was the only one who noted Miss Mainwaring's rising colour, and her most unusual temporary confusion.

By Jessie who had smiled, it was all forgotten in a minute; she let the two elder women precede her, and followed them, chattering and laughing with Mr Rayton. He had always been rather a friend of hers, and to Jessie it was a pleasing little variety in this long summer day to have come across some one who was, or who at any rate was

willing to pretend he was, interested in her. This not from any flirting propensities, but for the simple reason that she felt a little in need of a kindred spirit to-day; Miss Mainwaring and Elizabeth Stevens being better suited to each other than to this fresh girl, who had as yet neither felt nor known enough to interest either of them much, and who had not learnt, either, to pretend knowledge that she had not. But this did not affect a man of Mr Rayton's age. She was not a companion in thought, experience, feeling—anything; he could never have talked to her of himself, his own plans or hopes, as he might have done to a woman with Delicia's grave sympathetic eyes; but he liked to listen to her glad voice running on about herself, her pleasures—all that she hoped lay yet in store for her—just as some few months back he had listened to her sister.

Only Jessie would never make the same mistake Cicely had done,—was at once too young for her years, and possessed of too little coquetry; facts which made her at once safer and less interesting: for coquetry is interesting, let the stern moralist say what he will; for it is generally accompanied by a desire to please, and, as in most cases, anything ardently desired is half accomplished.

“The kettle boils,” cried Betty, as they neared the scene of her late labours. “Nelly”—raising her voice a little, so that it might reach the ears of the child who was keeping watch by the fire—“will you go and tell father he must leave off thinking, and come for a cup of tea? I will go if

you like," she added, "or send one of the others," as Nelly, with some little difficulty rose to her feet and pushed her hat back from her hot forehead.

"No, thank you, Betty; I should like to go if you will make the tea."

"Very well; and if you meet any stragglers on the way, will you tell them that no effort will be made to find those whose instincts do not tell them that it is tea-time? Come, Miss Mainwaring, will you sit down here? It seems a great pity," she added, "to go to a picnic with a preoccupied mind as some of our companions seem to have done, for it appears to me that they miss the point of the whole thing."

"And what do you consider the point of the whole thing, Miss Stevens?"

"Mr Rayton, I wonder you ask," Elizabeth replied, raising her eyebrows: "why, the eating and drinking, of course. On what other occasion do we devote days and nights of worry beforehand to the question of what we shall eat and drink? On what other occasion is the idea of the day's amusement compressed into the amount of meals of which we can partake?"

"Oh, prosaic Elizabeth!" said Mr Stevens, joining them, surrounded by the children.

"It is all very well, father, for *you* to laugh, but I assure you for days I have thought of little else but this problem: If"—looking comprehensively around her—"a mob of hungry children eat so many slices of bread each, how many loaves would

be required for a whole day? That, for the future, will be always my idea of a picnic."

"Dear Betty!" said Nelly, softly, slipping down by her sister's side; "but it has been such a perfect day, has it not, that it makes up for any trouble?"

Betty laid a soft, caressing hand on the child's thin fingers. "Have you enjoyed it so much, Nelly?"

"Yes; I don't think I could have been happier."

"That is well. And here is Nan, who doubtless echoes your words; and Cyril in the distance, who looks as if he ought. Even father, if allowed to speak for himself, would declare, and believe his words, that he is happier lying beneath a beech-tree—thinking—all through a hot summer day, than passing his time between a club and his studio."

"And you, Miss Stevens, now that you have acted interpreter for so many, let us hear what you think yourself?"

"What do I think?" repeated Betty, slowly. "Well, I think a great deal of the supposed enjoyment is a delusion. If one is not in love, or very young"—with a glance at Nell.

"Or very old," interposed Mr Stevens.

"In fact, if, as I said before, the eating and drinking are not the chief attraction, I think one is prone to consider that it is a slight drawback to comfort to have everything hot that ought to be cold, and *vice versa*—the butter in a liquid state, and the tea just warm; also the daddy-longlegs,"

with a shrug of her shoulders, and pausing in her remarks to catch one that was pursuing its course unheedingly across the table-cloth, “and the insects,” fishing out a drowning fly with her tea-spoon.

“I am half convinced, Miss Stevens, by your eloquence—and its practical illustrations,” said Mr Rayton.

“I thought you would be,” Betty replied, resignedly, still intent upon rendering assistance to the drowning fly. “The country for a change; but for a continuance, I feel for the foreigner, who found the monotony of ‘green trees, green trees!’ and ‘wife, wife!’ all day long, unbearable.”

Every one was much amused at Betty’s discourse on town *versus* country. Afterwards, when tea was over and all had dispersed, and only Betty and Miss Mainwaring were left packing up plates and dishes, with Mr Rayton to look on and assist with his advice, he asked, in allusion to her first words, “But do you not think, Miss Stevens, that, after all, most enjoyment *is* a delusion? We count the days, weeks—the years, perhaps—till we attain it, and then we find the looking forward was the best part. That is a truism, of course, but one feels it so much at times.”

“The best way is never to look forward,” said Betty, abruptly, “but just pretend you enjoy everything as it comes, and the very pretence generally gains you something.”

“No, Miss Stevens, you are wrong, though I cannot see clearly where; but your philosophy *is* at fault.”

"Elizabeth means," said Miss Mainwaring, gently, "that even if one is not quite enjoying one's self, that, by means of a little, what she calls pretence, we can prevent ourselves from casting the shadow of our own trouble over others."

"That I can understand," Mr Rayton replied, drawing nearer to Delicia—"that, of course, is unselfishness, and a virtue," he added, "that I am afraid many have to practise."

He scarcely remarked, as he seated himself by Miss Mainwaring's side, with a question as to whether she minded his cigar, that Elizabeth Stevens had not spoken again after Delicia's words, but had risen and wandered away, leaving the other two alone. But Delicia—unobservant, matter-of-fact, as many called her—*had* noticed it, as also the quick movement with which she had first put on her spectacles; and something told her that, for some unexplained cause, the dark eyes had filled with tears. Her heart ached for this girl, who was younger, and yet so much older and more careworn, than herself.

"Yes, Elizabeth Stevens *is* unselfish," she said, as if pursuing her own train of thought.

"Who?—Miss Stevens?" looking round to where she had lately sat; "she has gone."

"Yes."

"What a curious girl she is! She looks as if she might have had a story."

Delicia raised her eyes to Philip Rayton's, and something in them prompted her to say, "She wrote 'Miserrimus.'"

"No!" he exclaimed; "impossible!—that girl? Ah, well," he added, "of course you know; but it is a wonderful book for a woman to have written."

"She is a wonderful woman," Delicia assented.

"And you think," he said, a minute later, "that any one who wrote that book must have had a story?"

"Before I knew who had written it," Delicia replied, "I was asked my opinion as to the sex of the author, and I said I felt it must have been written by a most unhappy woman."

"Strange," he said, musingly; "my opinion, when I had finished it, agreed with yours as to the author's acquaintance with sorrow, but I was sure it was the work of a man."

"But I suppose sorrow would affect certain characters, whether they belonged to a man or a woman, in the same way; and if they had the power, they would write of it in the same manner."

"Women ought never to have a story," Mr Rayton replied, bending slightly forward, and looking into his companion's fair face and calm grey eyes. And then suddenly, with a little impatient sigh, and passing his hand over his dark head, that was so thickly sprinkled with white, "That privilege is reserved for men."

Delicia looked up at the sound of his voice, and for a second half compassionately, half wonderingly, at the so strangely contrasting dark eyes and grey head; but after that second's silence, her thoughts reverting to his last words, "But Miss Stevens is not an ordinary woman," she said.

"And extraordinary women are not meant to be happy, you think?"

"Are not capable of it, rather," corrected Miss Mainwaring. "Perhaps they expect too much, either in themselves or others, and so are disappointed."

"And disappointing. Take, for instance, a woman who had written such a book as 'Miserrimus'——"

"You would not like her," said Miss Mainwaring, thoughtfully.

"No," Mr Rayton replied, equally gravely; "I think not. Her experience must have been too wide, and consequently her mind is too old for her to prove herself, when conversing with a man, the weaker vessel."

"Perhaps her imagination is so strong that it may have done the work instead of experience," interposed Miss Mainwaring.

"Impossible, I should say. But even if so, I don't think that that would make her any the more popular."

It was very evident that Elizabeth Stevens was doomed to be for ever unappreciated by men.

"Ah, that is because you do not know her," Delicia said, half rising, and speaking much more earnestly. "Now, I who do, have long ceased to like,—I love her."

"Miss Stevens ought to be—and I hope she is—worthy of her champion," Mr Rayton replied, pleasantly.

CHAPTER XVI.

LE BONHEUR N'EST PAS FAIT POUR LES ESPRITS
INQUIETS.

“As if sea would not drown, I ween,
Nor serpent bite.”

“GOOD afternoon, Miss Mainwaring. Tired, and hot, and dusty, I have come in to beg a few minutes' shelter and rest before returning to No. 39.”

“That is very good of you, Elizabeth; you know you are always welcome. Sit down and make yourself comfortable.”

“One could not very well feel otherwise here,” Elizabeth replied, as she drew some work from her pocket, and leant back luxuriously in a great arm-chair, looking enviously round the room as she spoke; “it is so cool and dark after the glare outside, and the very sight of you, so white and unhurried, is refreshing.”

Miss Mainwaring smiled.

“This is just the sort of day,” Betty continued, “when I can sympathise with father, who says he cannot go into the drawing-room without a sun-

shade. This," with a comprehensive glance about her, "is a rest to one's eyes."

"Why, Elizabeth, we shall live to see the walls of No. 39 papered with olive-green and grey-blue yet."

"Oh, I daresay, and a dinner-service hung up there-on! I must be catching it from Cicely," and Elizabeth laughed. "But it is not only the walls here that soothed me—it is many things combined—the pictures—everything; and yet they *are* ugly!" said Betty frankly, rising as she spoke. "I wonder why it is that I admire them? I think it must be because they are all real; there is nothing 'imitation' about them. And I do so hate shams and unrealities! Sometimes there seems to be nothing else. And," after a second pause, throwing down her work, "I am tired of it all."

"Dear Miss Stevens," said Delicia, bending forward, and laying her cool, white hand on the girl's burning ones, "you are overworking yourself; you will end by making yourself ill. No one," she went on, "can stand a long strain on the mind without paying for it sooner or later."

"What do you mean?" said Elizabeth, quickly—almost defiantly—drawing away her hands as she spoke. "There, let us change the subject," with a quick alteration in the tones of her voice; "I am tired out. What with the heat, and the children's holidays, and the colour of the bridesmaids' dresses, and Cicely in the studio, and Mr Fullerton in the drawing-room—I really think it is not surprising!"

"Could *I* be of any use? You know how gladly

I would help you." Delicia felt checked and chilled, but she strove not to let it appear in her voice that she was wounded, for she could sympathise with Elizabeth's rejection of her proffered sympathy. In her own quiet reserved way she would have done much the same had any one tried to win her confidence ; but then her calm, quiet words would rarely offend, as did Elizabeth's quick, brusque ones.

"You do help," Elizabeth replied, "often—always—whenever I see you ; I never knew any one who was *such* a help." But as she walked over to the window she sighed.

And Delicia sighed too, thoughts of Cyril coming into her mind at his sister's words.

"Miss Mainwaring," said Elizabeth suddenly, and as she spoke, with swift, impatient steps she moved to Delicia's side, "I am not ungrateful, though I am sure I appear like it ; but you are good and patient, and will think the best of me possible. Listen," sinking on her knees by Delicia's side, and taking the white hands in hers ; "I am going to tell you a story, just to prove to you that I am not intentionally disagreeable."

Delicia did not speak, only lifted those listening grey eyes with such a world of pity in them. Something told her the story would be a sad one.

"A story," Betty repeated ; "that sounds confessional, does it not? and women ought never to have stories to tell," not heeding the little start Delicia gave at her words. "No ; women should never go down into the arena and strive with men, for they get dusty and tired—their strength is so soon gone ;

and, worse than that, there is always the risk of their being wounded, or scratched at least, and that aggravates both the watchers and the fighters. No; women should be just like you—calm and quiet and beautiful—always above, or at any rate out of the *mêlée*; always ready to cheer, to counsel the distressed, welcome the wearied, and bind up their wounds,—all of which means I should never have written ‘Miserrimus.’”

“I think you are sweeping in your assertions, Elizabeth. Women are not all fitted for the same kind of work.”

“Then they should be,” Betty replied, shortly, “for the world is sweeping in its condemnation. Of course,” she went on more quietly, “I quite recognise the fact that if we leave our own sphere and mingle with the struggling world, we must expect to be spoken of and judged by it as we should never have been if we had remained safe out of harm’s way. But still,” she paused,—“it *is* unjust, you know,” she resumed, meditatively, “not even to try us by the law wherewith they try one another, but by a far harsher one, kept especially for us.”

“That is true, Elizabeth; but then do we not also try the men who leave their own work and take up ours by a special harsh standard of our own, and yet after all they are doing no harm?”

“Now it is very strange, but in all my consideration of the subject I never took that view of it. O Delicia! what a gift it is to have a great deal of common-sense!” Elizabeth spoke more lightly.

"You must tell me the end of the story," Miss Mainwaring said; "as yet I have only heard the preface."

"Well, the preface has taken so long in telling," said Elizabeth, slowly, "that I think——"

"Mr Rayton," interrupted Grey, opening the door, and ushering in Philip.

"How do you do, Mr Rayton? And good-bye, Delicia. No," as Mr Rayton would have spoken, "I am on my way homewards; indeed, I ought to have been there long ago, but I could not resist coming in here on my way, and once here——"

"It was not so easy to go," Mr Rayton said.

"No; particularly when one knows that directly one arrives at home, one is called upon to decide the most becoming colour for six young ladies to wear, all of whom are of different ages and complexions."

"I do not wonder you come here, then," Mr Rayton replied, as he held out his hand in farewell, and his eyes wandered to Delicia, as she stood up to say good-bye to her friend—so fair, with all the beauty of gentle womanhood; and his troubled heart felt also a shadow of rest fall across it, as on the door closing behind Elizabeth, she turned back to her wide, old-fashioned arm-chair.

"I have soon taken advantage of your permission to come and see you, have I not?" he remarked; "but I was anxious to see this lonely old house," he said; and then added, as if it had not been part of his original sentence, "that you told me so much about the other day."

"I am very glad to see you," she replied; "I think it was very kind of you to come."

But even Mr Rayton, whom she was really glad to see, could not quite put out of her mind the confession that she felt assured had been just hovering on the lips of Elizabeth Stevens.

"I hope it was not the sight of me that sent Miss Stevens away. I am afraid I interrupted a confidential talk."

Miss Mainwaring blushed, and did not immediately look up, and was painfully conscious all the time that a pair of quick, dark eyes were noting the blush and the downcast looks.

"A confidential talk can easily be resumed with an opposite neighbour," she said, evasively—"can it not?" And then the blush faded, and with an effort she turned her thoughts from Elizabeth Stevens to her present visitor. "I am pondering in my mind," she continued, "which is never a very quick one at making plans, of some means of getting her—Elizabeth, I mean—out of town after the wedding. She is looking so delicate, and there is no one at home to notice it."

"Is there no Mrs Stevens?"

"Yes; but to tell the truth, though she is very kind and pleasant, and plays most beautifully, she is not a mother who would notice whether her daughters looked delicate or not."

"Well, I agree with you that every one ought to get out of London as soon as they can; I find it growing daily more unbearable."

"Are you going away?"

"I? No, Miss Mainwaring; I am a business man, and cannot attend to my fancies."

"There are other things which prevent people going away, however much they might like it."

"Too poor?" questioned Mr Rayton, with a nod in the direction of No. 39. "Yes, that is bad—about as bad a reason as one could have."

"Not the worst, though," Delicia said, gravely.

"And what may that be?"

"Too friendless," she replied, lifting her serious eyes to his.

"What do you mean?" he questioned hastily; "has she no one to whom she could go?"

"I was not thinking of Miss Stevens."

"Of whom, then?"

"Of myself," said Delicia, quietly; and then noticing the sympathy in the eyes fixed upon her, "I was only thinking—it was foolish of me, of course—that if I had a friend anywhere, Elizabeth and I might have gone away together; but do you know that I have not a friend in the world: is it not strange?"

"Very strange," he assented. "And as you and Miss Stevens seem both to be so forlorn, why do you not go away together?"

"Mr Rayton, thank you. I wonder I never thought of it before; but as I told you," with her rare little laugh, "I never am clever at originating anything, but now that you have put the idea into my head, I will work it out. Now, will you ring the bell, and we will have some tea."

"I am glad to have helped you, Miss Mainwaring,

and that is a division of labour I like. I do not mind making the plans, but then I like some one else to carry them out."

"That is providing a very easy part for the 'some one else,'" Delicia replied.

From Cicely Arbuthnot that speech might have been interpreted in such a way as to lead to a repartee; but the very sight of Miss Mainwaring precluded any idea, however faint, of *badinage* or flirtation in any form, and Mr Rayton did not feel that an answer was required of him, so sat still watching the while the gracious, womanly figure presiding over the tea-table; the fair bent head, the rather large but beautiful hands,—even the grey linen dress, which fell in such soft folds, and looked so cool and summer-like, came in for a share of his admiration. To Delicia, it was like so many afternoons long ago, before a girl with bronzed hair and a sweet smile had come across her path, that she was almost startled on looking up not to see the slight slender figure she knew so well, with the restless hands and delicate mouth, with all those curves about it which told of such lack of strength, but instead this square-shouldered man with the grey head and eager dark eyes, that had a look in them as if they had fought a fight with fate.

To Philip Rayton, lingering on notwithstanding the warning chime rung out by the little clock, as each quarter of an hour slipped away, it was such rest, such peace, that the fight he had fought—the fight which had sown the grey hairs—was quite forgotten, and life was once more the fair desirable

thing it had seemed when he had gone forth at eighteen, in the strength of his young manhood, to make or mar it.

But when late that same night, the glamour departed, he stood alone in his own dreary lodging, he did not let his thoughts rest on the graceful woman in the dark, old-fashioned drawing-room of 1 Anne Square, as they would fain have done. "No," he said with a quick impatient sigh, "I must remember—remember always; and if ever I should find there is the slightest chance of my forgetting, I must never go there again!"

And saying this he overlooked the fact that whilst there to-day he *had* quite forgotten.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHATEVER'S LOST, IT FIRST WAS WON.

“ But knowledge is
Bought only with a weary care,
And wisdom means a world of pain.”

“ OH for a punkah,” sighed Betty, seated in the drawing-room of No. 39 on a hot afternoon in June, “and a black to pull it! Not a London one, Bob, so you need not look so startled, but a real *bona fide* Indian. Now, Susy, you are doing nothing, so come here; nothing that signifies, that is,” as Susy began remonstrating,—“so come and fan me whilst I work.”

“ I will,” said Nell, who was also in the room.

“ Thanks, Nell :” and Betty took up her sewing. “ Oh for the good old days when Nan assisted on these festive occasions! I hope,” looking round the room, “that the next marriage that occurs in the family will be in the winter; if not, I give you all fair warning, I shall not be here to grace the scene. Promise Nell.”

“ Yes, I promise,” said Nell, laughing. “ Why,

Betty," laying her hands on her sister's, "how hot you are! I wonder how you *can* work!"

"It is rather difficult," said Betty, resignedly; "but as there are not many others in this house who are even capable of making up favours——"

"But I could," interrupted Nell.

"No, Nell. There you make a mistake; our intellects are all too superior to be able to do anything useful. Cyril could paint a picture, mother play a sonata, you could ravish our ears with a performance on the violin, and I could write a book—but none of us can sew a piece of ribbon into the form of a bow. Look at that horned monster," pointing to the one just completed, "who would ever imagine the fever I have worked myself up into over it?"

Here Betty's hands dropped idly in her lap, and she leant back in her chair.

"Poor Betty!" said Nell, sympathisingly; "I am afraid you are overtired with this worry and excitement; but you will soon be all right when it is all over, and everything is as it was before—then you can get some rest."

"Rest!" repeated Betty, almost to herself,—“of course if it all is as it was before; but if not?” Then becoming aware of the words that had escaped her, "This will not do, Nell. Why, if I do not put more energy into my work, half the company will have to go undecorated to-morrow; in which case," she concluded, lightly, "I should think the wedding would scarcely be legal."

"Betty," said Nell, eagerly, "I have thought of

a capital plan for helping you. Will you lie down on the sofa for a quarter of an hour, whilst I go and see if it is capable of being carried out?"

"The idea is a good one, Nell. I think if I were to be still for a quarter of an hour I should work with a better will afterwards," and Elizabeth moved across the room to the sofa.

Five minutes later, Miss Mainwaring, putting on her bonnet preparatory to taking a drive, was informed that a little Miss Stevens was below, and would be much obliged if she would see her, if only for a minute.

"Ask her to come up here," Delicia said. But on Grey's volunteering it was the little lame girl, she said, "Oh then you had better leave her in the drawing-room—I am just going down."

"Oh, dear Miss Mainwaring, are you going out?" was Nelly's exclamation, and a shade of disappointment crept over her face as Delicia entered the room.

"I was, Nell. But tell me, do you want me? I was not going to do anything very important."

And then Nell confided all her anxieties. Of how there was no one to do anything at home; "and Betty is ill, I am sure of it," the girl went on, her eyes filling as she spoke. "She does too much. There is no one to help her, you see; because, of course," she added, loyally, "mother has to look after father, and Nan is always with Mr Fullerton, and there are *so many* children;" and she sighed as she looked round the cool, darkened room and

thought of the scene of confusion she had left, and of Betty's white tired face. "And I thought, perhaps," she concluded timidly, raising her pretty, pleading eyes.

"Yes, my dear, and your thoughts were quite correct, for they were that if I had nothing important to do this afternoon, I would go over and see if I could not help Elizabeth with the favours. And it was most fortunate, was it not, that you did not miss me, for in five minutes I should have started."

Then they went down the steep old-fashioned stairs together.

"Grey, you can tell Robinson when he comes that I shall not want the carriage to-day. Come, Nell." And the two started across the Square, little Nell's crutches making a sad echo down the silent hot street.

It was not very often that Miss Mainwaring found her way to No. 39 ; in fact, as she followed Nelly up-stairs, she could not recall having ascended them since the never-to-be-forgotten night of the At Home—a night for her full of most painful associations ; for, for some time after the discoveries made that evening, she had avoided all the Stevens family. Even now, when the whole of the Past was so utterly *past* that she did not think she would have recalled it, even if it had lain in her power to do so, she could not resist glancing upwards towards the door of the studio where she had gone that night to see Cyril and Miss Arbuthnot looking together at "Engaged."

"No, Cyril is out," Nell said in answer to her glance; "he has gone to see Cicely." Then she opened the drawing-room door, and stood aside for Miss Mainwaring to pass in.

On the sofa, looking very white and tired, with closed eyes, rested Elizabeth. At the farther end of the room was a group of the younger children, and in the midst of them, on a chair, stood Christopher, reciting "The Death of Montrose."

"Chris, could you not speak a little lower?" Betty asked, but without opening her eyes.

"No, Betty—impossible," replied Christopher, who seemed much heated and exhausted with his labours; "as it is, they will not attend and do their parts. 'The grim Geneva ministers.' Now, Jack and Bob, you know you are the 'grim Geneva ministers'—why don't you move?"

"I'm not," said Jack, throwing himself down on the ground. "I want to be the man to cut off his head; and if you don't let me," rising from the floor, "I'll scream." And here he became aware of Miss Mainwaring's presence, and stood still, awe-struck.

Betty started up at the sudden silence. "I beg your pardon, Delicia, I never heard you come in; but the children make such a noise, that it is impossible to remark such a trifle as the opening of a door. Christopher, could you not go and act somewhere else?"

"Where?" cried all the children in chorus.

"There is the dining-room," began Betty.

"Yes," interrupted Susy, "we tried that."

"And Nan said just the same thing," interposed Bob. "'Children, don't come here—there is the drawing-room.'"

"And then Mr Fullerton backed her up, and instead of saying, 'Don't be *selfish*, Nan,'" mimicked Christopher, "he turned upon us: 'Now, *dear* children, don't tease your sister, but go up-stairs and amuse yourselves *there*!'"

"Christopher," said Betty, severely, "that is not allowed."

"I'm sorry, Betty; but," scathingly, "as *you* have not got a lover to look after you, we are going to stay here."

"We are proud to be so honoured; but, whilst Miss Mainwaring is here, I cannot allow Jack to lie on his back and scream, as I heard him threatening to do. Those who stay here must be quiet."

Betty had risen now, and was standing by Delicia's side. "This is good of you," she said; "but take my advice and go home, for 39 is even more displeasing to a well-regulated mind than usual. It may be the heat, or the holidays, but for some reason we are all tired and cross. Suppose now, children," turning towards the dismal, subdued little group, "that I were to lend you my room for the afternoon, do you think you would do very much mischief?"

"You are a brick, Betty. Come along, Bob. Now Susy," and there was a rush to the door, a scramble, and many mingled cries, whereof the words "*will* chop off his head" were borne indistinctly back.

"That is good of you, Betty," said Nell, softly. "Now let us sit down and see what has to be done. Miss Mainwaring has come to help."

"It is very kind of her," said Betty, gratefully. "We will not let her waste a minute. She shall devote her energies to the favours at once."

"This is work that just suits me," Delicia said, drawing off her gloves; "but I am going to do it only on one condition."

"And that is?"

"That you lie down on the sofa, and take off your spectacles, which I am sure only tire your eyes when you have a headache. Then I will sit beside you and make up the bows, whilst you tell me all you can about to-morrow."

Betty smiled. "I am so tired that I think I must obey."

"Of course. Now tell me, what is going to be done about the children to-morrow?"

"After much discussion, it has been settled that *the* breakfast is to be at 15 Bute Street, and that the little Arbuthnots are to come here, and have a grand festivity with our children. Little Nell, here," touching the child's hand tenderly, "is going to preside at it. I only wish I were going to be with her. And it would be much more sensible," she added, reflectively; "for can you imagine anything more incongruous than this countenance, with its many signs of old age, of which spectacles is one, framed—I believe that is the correct expression—in a white bonnet? Why, it will be quite dispiriting to the other bridesmaids, who will all

be trembling, and fearing that they look the same!"

"Elizabeth, I think your head is better," Miss Mainwaring remarked with a smile.

"Yes; a little more rest, and I shall be quite myself by to-morrow, fit to cope with brides, breakfast, bridegrooms, speeches, and all the other items."

"I fear it will be a very tiring day."

"I *know* it will; but I keep consoling myself by remembering that, put as much into it as is possible, yet we cannot really make it longer than other days."

"And where are they going afterwards?"

"The Fullertons to Scotland, and Cyril and his bride abroad. I rather envy them; and yet I do not think I should care much about either Cyril or Cicely for a travelling companion."

"Would you like me?" asked Miss Mainwaring; "because"—as Betty was about to interrupt her—"I want you so much, after all this is over, to come away with me. I want a little change myself, and it would be such a pleasure to have you for a companion."

"It would be perfect," said Betty, her eyes sparkling, "but, of course, impossible."

"Why impossible, Elizabeth? I only think of going to some little place in Normandy or Brittany. I am unambitious, you see."

"Oh, Betty," cried Nell, "you must go! Miss Mainwaring, you must make her; it would do her so much good!"

"My dear Nell, I should not want much persuading if I had only myself to consider ; but pray, may I ask who is going to look after this home for 'indigent poor' during my absence?"

"I will."

"You, you poor little scrap! Why, there would be nothing left of you when I returned!"

"But, Betty, I am nearly sixteen, and I am sure when *you*——"

"Yes; but then I was different. I was born, I believe, capable of struggling with the world, and you were *not*."

"All the same," said Miss Mainwaring, "I think Nell would make a very nice little housekeeper for the month that you are away; and here is Nan who, I am sure, will say the same thing."

"Oh, poor Betty," cried Nan, "how tired you look! Nell, why did you not come and fetch me to help her? How could you let me be so selfish?"

"No, it was not Nell's fault, Nan; but the children brought back such discouraging reports of Mr Fullerton's reception of them, that none of us found ourselves brave enough to venture into the lion's den."

Nan blushed such a sudden bright red, and looked so thoroughly self-reproachful, that Elizabeth hastened to add: "I am afraid, Nan, the sight of your happy face is all the good you could have been to us, for I don't think your talent lies in the making up of bows, any more than that of the rest of your family. Besides, Delicia has come to do

my share of work on condition that I lie still and watch her."

"Miss Mainwaring, you *are* kind," Nan said, gratefully; "don't," she added, blushing again, "think more hardly of me than you can help."

"Dear, I don't think hardly of you at all," Delicia answered, looking into the pretty flushed face; "I should think the eve of one's wedding is sufficient excuse for any one not to have quite all their wits about them. But now you must come and listen to the plan I have been proposing, and add your persuasions to Nell's and mine."

"And it must be contrived somehow," was the conclusion to which they all came, when, the afternoon over, Delicia rose to depart, even though Elizabeth still shook her head, and said it sounded too good ever to come true.

Directly Miss Mainwaring had gone, Nell rose up. "I am going to father," she said, "now that you are here, Nan, to look after Betty. Make her rest," she added, warningly. And thus the two sisters were left alone together.

"Betty, dear," Nan cried, kneeling down by the sofa and clasping her arms about her sister, "I feel so ashamed of myself! I never could have believed I should have been so selfish. Oh, dear Betty, please forgive me!"

"My dear Nan," said Betty, reprovingly, "please let this nonsense terminate at once. What is this?" touching a tear that was trickling down Nan's cheek. "I cannot allow tears, self-reproaches, and cries for forgiveness, or, at any rate, cannot officially re-

cognise them, until I am told what they are all for."

But poor Nan could do nothing but murmur—"And you have been so good to me."

"That speech I can understand," said Betty, "for I do not think I have once said anything that could in the smallest degree recall *him* to your mind of late. But that will all cease, if I am to be deluged with tears as my reward. Nan"—as Nan did not look up—"has *Drake* gone yet?"

A smile came then, and Nan rose off her knees and brushed the tears out of her eyes.

"Betty," she said, in tones of reproof, "that is forbidden."

"So are these," Betty retorted, touching Nan's cheek; "so now that you have come to terms, sit down and talk to me. And don't worry about me," she added; "I am all right, only tired out with the heat,—and I have a headache, too, but I trust to sleep it off, and to look my very best to-morrow."

"You are sure," said Nan, in a low voice, and leaning over her sister as she spoke, "that it is only that—that—You are not unhappy?"

"Unhappy!" repeated Betty, "what *do* you mean?"

But she did not add anything more; and her eyes wavered away from the blue pleading ones above, and the hands trembled a little that sought for the spectacles. But they found them for all that, and from behind their shelter Betty turned to her sister.

"I thought—I meant——" Nan began, hesitatingly.

"Oh, I see," interrupted Betty, and she laughed; "you thought I was quite jealous! Ah! perhaps if I had only behaved prettily, and not let my chances slip, *I* might have captivated John—in which case—— Oh, Nan, how can you let me think of what might have been?"

What could Nan do but laugh, and say to herself, as she had so often said before, that Betty never had, never could care for any one; and say it pityingly, looking at Betty's careworn, troubled life, and then at her own, where gleams of love were making for her a golden path whereon to tread?

All this she felt, though Nan Stevens was no fool. She had seen too much of life, girl though she was, to dream that love could ever be all in all, but the experience of others had not destroyed her belief in the possibilities of her own future. And had she not ever before her eyes an example of undying love which had outlived poverty, care, sorrow, and every other kind of trouble, and which yet shone bright and unclouded over the world of home, lifting it up by its brightness above the sordid cares of everyday life? And to this she looked forward for herself. Was it, therefore, any wonder that she fancied Betty had missed something out of life?

Cyril, sauntering along the hot London streets, was experiencing something of the same kind, but his feelings and hopes did not run in such clear lines as Nan's.

Yet he was happy, perfectly happy, he would have replied, if he had been asked; but he was, unfortunately, a man who could never do anything without wondering the next minute if it would not have been better to have done it differently, or to have left it undone altogether.

"She is a perfect picture," he was thinking as he strolled along, his eyes lifted to the pale blues and greens of the evening sky overhead—"a perfect picture!" And something of enthusiasm filled him as he thought of the slender, brown-haired girl, who had stood by his side in the olive morning-room of 15 Bute Street to say good-bye to him for the last time before she should stand by his side at the altar to become his wife,—and of the soft dark eyes that had been raised to his with such a world of love and confidence shining in them.

"Good-bye, Cyril"—the words rang in his ears still; "to-morrow, so it seems to me, my real life is about to begin." But after all, it was more the attitude, the grace, the peculiar girlish charm that always hung about everything Cicely did or said, that he remembered, than the words themselves.

And as all these thoughts passed through Cyril's mind, he turned the corner into Anne Square, and found himself face to face with Delicia Mainwaring.

"Good evening," said Delicia, pleasantly; "I have been nearly the whole afternoon at No. 39, helping your sisters."

"Have you?" he made answer, pausing by her side; "that is very good of you, for I have no doubt they stood much in need of help."

And then, as Miss Mainwaring with a "Good night" would have passed on: "Stop one second," he said, holding out his hand as if to stay her; "I should like to thank you before you go on, for a few words of advice you gave me some time ago. Do you remember?"

"Yes," Delicia replied, gravely, "she remembered."

"Well, this is the last chance I may have for some time of speaking to you alone, so I should just like to tell you that I thought it kind of you to say what you did. "No one knows," he went on, in those low, sweet tones that Delicia knew so well, "how worried and anxious and perplexed I was at that time."

He paused, the old sensation of rest coming back, as the grey eyes were lifted in the listening way he knew of old. "I hope," Miss Mainwaring spoke in a grave, serious voice, "that many years of happiness lie before you. You know, I think, that no one wishes better things for you than I do. And for the future, you will always have some one whose duty and pleasure it will be to help and advise you whenever you are worried or perplexed."

If Betty had made that speech, Cyril would have suspected sarcasm—as it was, he looked down quickly and suspiciously—but one glance at the fair face raised to his bid him put that thought on one side.

"Yes;" he spoke doubtfully, and then as Miss Mainwaring showed unmistakable signs of not

lingering any longer, he held out his hand. "Good-bye," he said, "and thank you once more for that—and for much help, and many, many happy hours in past days."

And then he pursued his homeward way, keenly realising once more the luxury that had been so long denied him, of propping his weakness up against the strength of that quiet grave woman, and thus gaining a moment's ease and rest for himself.

And Delicia pursued her way homeward also, but much disturbed in spirit.

She is not quite the same Delicia Mainwaring we made acquaintance with eight months ago on that foggy November evening; her thoughts, her very life has widened, and with that her feelings and her sympathies also.

Cyril Stevens and Elizabeth, the two people who have of late had most influence over her life, have forced her out of the narrow groove in which she had lived so long; and at the touch of their hands, both of them coming to her, though in such different ways, for help, life has assumed a different aspect. The sympathies which a life of repression had buried deep down out of sight, were being discovered as the demand arose for them.

Besides, coming in contact, as she now did, with one of Elizabeth Stevens' nature, she was finding a voice to express herself in; and many sentences of ready sympathy which she would only have *thought* of six months ago, from mingled shyness and habitual dislike to talking, now found utterance in words.

As she entered her home that evening, and walked up the dark stairs to the lonely old-fashioned drawing-room, for the first time in her life that she could remember Delicia felt that something was missing out of her life; that it was dreary coming back night after night to this empty house, where no one ever rose up to bid her welcome, to ask her if she were happy, to be grieved if she were not. With the enlargement of her own sympathies, there was growing up within her a longing for some one to sympathise with her.

"I never felt so lonely in all my life," she said, pacing backwards and forwards; "the whole world seems full of people loving one another, and there is not one creature in it who would care if they heard to-morrow that I was dead, excepting Elizabeth Stevens,—and she has Nan."

And then Cyril came to her mind, and his late farewell to her, and then—"I should like," she said to herself softly, and there paused, and looked out into the Square, as she had once before done with an uncertain "if" hovering on her lips. But this evening, the image that her mind's eye conjured up, as her lips curved into that little smile, was not that of the man who had parted from her an hour ago with Cicely Arbuthnot's fond words still ringing in his ears, but that of a man whose head was thickly strewn with grey; a man with keen, quick eyes, and a straight white forehead that contrasted oddly with a dark sunburnt face.

But Delicia did not waste much time in thoughts

and fancies—indeed it was a most rare occurrence her indulging in them at all; she never was one to repine over her lot, or even to strive to alter it; she took it just as it was sent, and grasped, and was grateful for, the blessings it contained, without thinking if they might with advantage have been more or greater. So she soon rang the bell, and told Grey to bring candles; and resolutely putting all questioning or complaining thoughts away from her, went up to her bedroom to take off her bonnet.

But as she passed up the steep stairs, and stood beneath the smoke-dried portrait of the old City merchant, it did not seem this time that he smiled in disdain, as he had done that day when she had said that little “if,”—but rather, as if he lifted his hands, and would fain, if he could only have spoken, have warned her back whilst there was yet time for a warning to be heeded.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOVE WELL WHO WILL—WISE WHO CAN.

“Just the old, old story
Of light and shade;
Love, like the opal tender,
Like it, maybe to vary,
Maybe to fade.”

It was the morning of the 28th of June, and Cicely Arbuthnot, in her wedding finery, her bright hair gleaming through her veil, her pretty eyes bent upon the ground, was standing alone in the drawing-room of 15 Bute Street,—thinking.

She was thinking—and it was a thought that did not often strike her—how much to be envied were those girls who at these turning-points of their lives had a mother to wish them “God speed” on their journey. Even Nan Stevens was possessed of this, to her, withheld blessing; for, absent-minded as she was, Mrs Stevens was a kind, good woman at heart, and would on occasion, if aroused, and the way made plain to her, have done anything—everything—that might have been demanded of her, and have sacrificed herself entirely in

the most motherly manner for the benefit of her children. Indeed at this very moment, at No. 39, she was alternately weeping over and caressing Nan in true motherly fashion ; now wishing they had never even seen Mr Fullerton ; and again exclaiming that she thought Nan's future was one that any girl might envy. But though, of course, Cicely could not know this, yet she suspected something of it, and it was because of this suspicion that she stood thus, with downcast eyes, thinking.

"I miss *something*," she thought regretfully : "of course Jessie is very kind, in fact ten times kinder than I ever thought *she* could be, and papa,——" and here her reverie was interrupted by the opening of the door, and papa himself coming in.

Poor old Mr Arbuthnot, it was with many a heart-pang that he had yielded to his daughter's prayers and tears, and allowed her to marry Cyril Stevens. Not that he had any paramount objection to the man himself, but he dreaded the time when he should miss Cicely's bright face about the house ; so he had accused himself of selfishness, and listened to his daughter's arguments, and had in every way behaved in the most liberal manner. He was an easy-going old gentleman, and liked peace for himself and those about him ; and it is to be feared, had his daughter's lover been a most mercenary man, he would have failed to discover it. But Cyril Stevens, with all his faults, was not a fortune-hunter, and had insisted that the liberal allowance Mr Arbuthnot was willing to make his

daughter, should be strictly settled upon herself. His mind ever so morbidly anxious as to what others might have to say of him, fearing the world's verdict might be that he had married for money.

"Cicely, dear——"

And then: "Oh, dear father!" Cicely cried, and twined both her arms about his neck, and clung to him as in all the nineteen years of her life she had never done before, realising what this long-trying, trustworthy affection was worth that she was leaving, and dimly foreseeing that perhaps in this rose-coloured future to which she was looking forward, where Love was to be the lord of all, there might yet arise a time when she would look back to her childhood's home and father's love with regret. But this was only for a second, and she was once more the bright hopeful girl, who had always all her life long gained that on which her heart was set (excepting on that one occasion which now she had learnt to know had been all a mistake), and who therefore, arguing from past experience, was now setting out for the happy future that she had planned.

The Church of St Margaret, Anne Street, was a gloomy old building, quite in keeping with the neighbourhood; and it was there, after much discussion, it had been decided that the twin weddings should take place. The choice had been Nan's, who had an affection for the old building; and Cicely being indifferent, it had been thus settled. It was a dreary place, with high pews, galleries, and clerk's desk, and all the various peculiarities where-

with the last generation were wont to delight themselves ; but it was possessed of one beauty, a rich, old, stained-glass window, whose purple and orange blended lights, heightened by the brilliant pure sunshine that was illuminating the world outside, streamed down on Cyril, throwing out, as against a background of light, his handsome face and the proud happy light in the eyes, causing the bystander to forget the weak lines that marred the perfect beauty of the mouth ; streamed down and turned to gleaming gold the red brown of Cicely's hair, and then lay in a bar of light across the figures of pretty Nan Stevens and her lover. And thus, standing bathed in that sea of glory, the vows were made, and the future of these four people was decided for them.

Betty was quite herself again to-day—a little pale perhaps. "But then, Betty never has any colour," Nan comforted herself with thinking, as coming up the red-carpeted steps she saw her sister standing with the group of bridesmaids there, awaiting her advent and Cicely's.

"Cyril is here," Betty told Nan in the few minutes' pause whilst the sisters stood together, "and no one knows what a relief it is to me ; for I have always had a sort of presentiment that he would on his wedding-day form what they call an 'item of news' in a local paper, under the heading of 'Disappearance of a Bridegroom on his Wedding-day.' But you see my presentiment is not going to be fulfilled. No, Nan, you need not look uneasy ; I have had no prophetic instincts about Mr Fuller-

ton; and if I had, they would have been set at rest long ago, for he also is here."

And then Cicely and her father appeared, and the little procession passed on. Later on Elizabeth, standing in the porch, marshalling every one, and telling the distracted guests where they were to go, and what they were to do, a thought, a memory would intrude itself, of one blustering March night, when the wind was blowing and the rain falling in torrents, and a little shivering crowd had stood on those very steps dreading the storm they must encounter. "Betty, do tell Jack——" And the dream vanished, and Betty found herself once more plunged in the whirlpool of her worries. But her thoughts did not altogether stray out of the track into which they had wandered, and several times during those busy hours she found herself thinking of that stormy night, and seeing that tall figure plodding down Anne Street through the wind and rain.

"Betty, did you know that Elliot was a Roman Catholic?" It was Cyril who spoke, meeting her on the stairs, and who thus put into words the name of the man that had been in her thoughts all day; and she started and turned paler yet, as she paused in her task of fastening up some wraps of Nan's to reply.

"Yes, I knew it. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for no particular reason. Some one just now mentioned him and told me that, and it surprised me, for I had never heard it."

"Who was it told you?" Betty asked quietly, bending over her task, but her hands trembled as she tightened the straps.

"I am sure I forget. Come, Cicely," raising his voice a little, "I think it is time we started. Good-bye, Betty." And his sister looked up surprised, for there was genuine emotion in Cyril's voice. "You have been a good sister to all of us. I do not know what the house would have been without you; I am afraid it will be horrid for you without Nan."

"Dear Cyril," Betty replied warmly, "I wish you every happiness. I am sure, though I may not have said much, you know that, do you not?" Then before he could answer, Cicely was by her side. Such a pretty Cicely, in silvery grey, with such a happy light shining in the eyes raised to hers that Betty, still softened by Cyril's words, could not resist them, but drawing her nearer kissed the soft cheek. "Good-bye, dear child," she said, "I hope—I trust you will be quite happy."

After that there was only to bid a temporary farewell to Nan, and then the day was ended for the chief actors; but for Betty, wearied and ill as she really felt, there was much yet to be done before she could enjoy her well-earned repose. There were the bridesmaids to be amused or put in the way of resting, then all the elders to be cheered during that blank dreary time which occurs at every wedding when the event itself is over, and *those* in whose honour *these* are assembled have departed, and it falls to the lot of the more ener-

getic of the party to try at any rate for the present to forget that whatever the cause, there has been a break-up of the home circle. All this Betty did bravely; and then, decked out in much finery, she descended to do honour to Jessie's dance—an amusement Jessie had insisted upon.

Even here she had enough to do, for Jessie had no wish to sit still, and was glad enough to shift her duties of hostess on to Betty's shoulders, who said she did not care to dance—was too tired, and would therefore be really glad to relieve Jessie of her responsibilities.

So, accompanied by old Mr Arbuthnot, she went from one to another, amusing people with her quick remarks and bright, clever face, hunting up shy girls and finding appropriate partners for them, and altogether doing her part so well that many people who had never seen her before, and thus only knew her, as she herself would have said, under her "15 Bute Street aspect," agreed together that they could not understand why they had heard so often that Miss Stevens was "blue" and disagreeable, and delighted in saying sharp things, just to show how clever she was.

"Quite a libel," as Mrs White confided to the elderly beau who took her down to supper. "Why, she is as pleasant and agreeable a woman as I have seen for a long time. Another girl at her age—for I suppose she is not so young as she once was—would have danced the whole evening, and never thought of any one but herself—and *she might* have done so."

"Yes," the elderly gentleman assented; he was sure she might, for he had heard many men ask her. "And she is a handsome woman, too," taking a good look at unconscious Betty through his eye-glass.

"Not *handsome*," Mrs White thought, "but *so* agreeable. Why, she had introduced so many men to Alice—my daughter, you know,"—(her friend said "Yes, yes," vaguely, he having lost the thread of her discourse a little, by reason of his eyes being still fixed admiringly on Betty),—"that she is already engaged for every dance this evening."

But whilst Betty was thus sowing golden opinions, which, it is to be hoped, will gain her a rich harvest by-and-by, she is beginning to feel if this does not soon come to an end, even her apparently exhaustless energy will fail her; and this was perceived of a sudden by one who was remarkably observant of those about him, and who always seemed, as if by instinct, to discover when any one—particularly when that one was weaker than himself—stood in need of support, protection, or any help that he could offer. And Miss Stevens' feverishly bright eyes and white cheeks thus appealed to Mr Rayton now, and he rose up from where he had been seated, talking to Miss Mainwaring—though, truth to tell, not without an effort, for to the author of 'Miserrimus' he was *not* partial—to see if he could help her.

"Miss Stevens,"—the elderly beau had obtained an introduction, and was trying his best to make himself fascinating.

Betty turned round.

"You are wanted," Mr Rayton said, offering his arm, which Betty, with an excuse to her ancient admirer, took, saying, "By whom?"

He did not immediately answer—did not speak till they had gained the doorway, and then he paused.

"That was a fiction, Miss Stevens; but I hope you will forgive me, for it was most evidently necessary you should be got away out of this hot room. Are you not grateful?"

"To speak plain truth, I am. I am hot and tired, and have a very bad headache—all of which is no doubt written on my face; but having gained this stepping-stone to safety, what are we going to do next?"

"Are you sufficiently at home here to take me to Mr Arbuthnot's study? That is the only place I can think of where I shall be able to get you a chair, and insist on your remaining quiet for half an hour. Also, are you brave enough to live through all that will be said of us, if some one else thinks of the same thing, and finds us there?"

"Mr Rayton," replied Betty, impressively, "I feel brave enough to dare anybody and anything for the sake of a few minutes' quiet and rest. Oh, this is comfort!" as they opened the door, and found themselves in a small, unlighted room, the windows wide open to the hot summer night. "One candle, Mr Rayton, please, and no more, and then ring—No, I will go myself, and ask Jessie's maid to bring me some eau-de-Cologne." In a few seconds she had returned, the bottle in her hand. "Now, Mr

Rayton, please, do not let me keep you any longer."

"No; I am not going to be sent away just yet," he replied, pleasantly; and he drew a chair up to the window. "I am very glad to sit here and rest for a little also." There was a moment's pause, and then Mr Rayton, turning his head from the contemplation of the world outside, said suddenly, "Have you known Miss Mainwaring long?"

A faint gleam of amusement shone in Betty's eyes at his question, but she dropped them directly; and when she lifted them again the light had quite died out of them.

For Elizabeth Stevens, also, was not quite the same as she had been six months ago,—was softer, more womanly, for her contact with Delicia Mainwaring. "Miss Mainwaring!" she repeated. "Let me see. We have known her ever since we passed out of the nebulous state, and appeared in the firmament of Anne Square as stars of magnitude."

Mr Rayton did not say anything for a second; he had noticed the amusement in Betty's eyes, and had winced at it.

Elizabeth marked the wince, and guessing the cause, was sorry for it, and did her best now to rectify her error. Without heeding his silence, she continued speaking, as if carrying out the train of thought. "She is a good woman—not good in its narrow, but its broadest, widest sense!"

"Yes," he said, forgetting his annoyance, and rising to the bait offered him. "And there is something sad about her life, is there not? I am afraid she must be terribly lonely."

"Until we knew her so well, I think weeks often went by without her seeing any one. And it is sad," she added, reflectively, "for any woman to be so utterly independent of every one."

Mr Rayton laughed. "Miss Stevens advocating women being dependent!" He spoke lightly, but something in his words brought a crimson spot into Betty's cheeks.

"From which speech, I suppose, I may infer that you consider *me* independent; and also, that you look upon the word as a term of reproach?"

Philip did not answer—perhaps scarcely heeded her words—his eyes having again turned to the summer sky; but Betty went on speaking more rapidly.

"That is the unjust judgment that the world always so readily passes on any woman who does not do exactly as all the others do. If," she said, passionately, "I had come in here and passed the time in flirtation—playing at friendship, love-making, or any other of the amusements with which the world is accustomed to while away the time—it would have had no fault to find!"

Philip turned round, startled at her vehemence.

"Mr Rayton," she said, leaning forward, her slender hands clasped together, her eyes fixed upon his face—and such eyes as they were too! They surprised him for the moment into involuntary admiration. "Mr Rayton," she said, "do you believe that it is pleasant for a woman to feel that she stands aloof from her fellows? Whatever the cause may be, believe me, it is a terrible misfortune, and that she suffers accordingly. And it may

be that it is from no fault of her own ; it may be that it is as impossible to be averted as is the loss of beauty or the lack of intellect. But whatever the cause, you must see for yourself how *lonely* it is to stand, as it were, apart from both men and women, having all the weakness of the one sex, and yet probably not possessing any of the strength of the other." She ceased suddenly, and her voice changing—"We are getting on to very serious subjects," she said. "I think it is quite time we returned to the *pleasures* of life."

Scarcely knowing what he did, Mr Rayton rose up and offered his arm. "If you are rested?" he said, doubtfully.

"Yes, as much rested as it is possible to be when one is *enjoying* one's self," she replied.

And Philip Rayton marvelled as he looked at the girl by his side, and wondered—wondered. But yet, all the same, the conclusion at which he arrived was, that the woman whose great dark eyes had seemed as if they would read his very soul—the woman, the mournful echoes of whose voice were still ringing in his ears, was, however appearances might be against it, the *real* Elizabeth Stevens.

It was with a sigh of relief that he found himself once more in the ball-room by Miss Mainwaring's side, Betty having left him to speak to some hitherto unperceived friends ; for whatever pity he might feel, these turbulent, troubled spirits—these tragedy queens in real life—gave no pleasure to the man who had himself lived through the burden and heat of the day.

CHAPTER XIX.

SOME THINGS ARE SOONER MARRED THAN MADE.

“Marriage is a desperate thing. The frogs in *Æsop* were extremely wise ; they had a great mind to some water, but they would not leap into a well because they could not get out again.”

Two years have passed away since we first made acquaintance with Delicia Mainwaring between the lights on that foggy November afternoon, in the old-fashioned house in Anne Square ; very nearly eighteen months since that hot midsummer morning, when, in gloomy St Margaret's, Cyril Stevens had taken Cicely Arbuthnot's hand in his, and had sworn to love and cherish her for so long as he should live.

The evening on which we renew our acquaintance with them is still and sad, with a mournful wailing wind, which tells of coming rain ; and Cicely, lying on a sofa, a novel in her hand, gives a nervous shudder as she hears it, and then immediately tries to forget it, by returning to the pages of her book. The room in which she lies is a small,

tastefully furnished drawing-room, in the house which Cyril took in Kensington on his marriage, and arranged with much thought and care for his bride. But it is not easy, looking at the worn figure on the sofa, with the thin cheeks and bright flush, that tells more of over-fatigue and illness than of health, to recognise the pretty Cicely of two years ago.

"Shall I bring up the dinner, ma'am?"

The opening of the door roused Cicely, and she looked up in surprise.

"What time is it?"

"A quarter to eight."

"I had no idea it was so late. No," to the servant, "it is no use; Mr Stevens has not come in."

Left once more alone, she shut up her novel with a yawn, and rising, walked over to the window, and drawing back the curtain, looked out; but the prospect out of doors was not tempting, so she soon, instead, began pacing up and down the room. In a little while the door opened again; this time it was her maid who entered.

"Won't you let me bring you up your dinner, ma'am, or a glass of wine—or something?" as Cicely shook her head; "it is not good for you to wait so long."

"No, I am not hungry."

As the little clock on the mantelpiece chimed half-past eight, there was the sound of a latch-key being fitted into the door, and a minute afterwards Mr Stevens came into the drawing-room.

"Have you dined, Cyril?"

"No; certainly not. What time is it?"

"I wish you would occasionally look at your watch when you are out; or if you want the dinner-hour changed from seven till half-past eight, why don't you say so?"

Cyril made no reply, but rang the bell in silence.

"By the by, Cyril, Ann broke that glass jug of yours to-day."

"What glass?" questioned Mr Stevens, quickly, rousing himself and looking round at his wife.

"The Bohemian glass."

"Not the one in the studio?"

"Yes, that one."

"How many times, Cicely, am I to give orders that Ann is not to go into the studio? Nothing *I* say," he concluded, in an angry voice, "is attended to by you or any one else in the house."

"You are here so little," she retorted, "that I should not have thought you would have discovered the fact, or that it would have made much difference if you had."

The maid, announcing that dinner was ready, made a slight diversion. Cyril could not well answer Cicely's taunt with Ann's eyes upon them, so in silence they left the room, on the walls of which hung that picture of the soft-eyed pretty English girl playing with her opals, in the light of the coloured window,—the picture which had given the artist fame, and for the inspiration for which he had looked into the brown eyes of Cicely Arbuthnot.

Directly the servant had left the room, and they found themselves alone, "Cyril," began Cicely, "where have you been all day?"

"Oh, at the club, and other places, and then I went home."

"Do you know that you went out at eleven this morning, and did not get back till half-past eight? Was that *all* you did? Did you see *no one* else?"

"I was at Miss Mainwaring's," he replied, a little reluctantly.

"At Miss Mainwaring's!" Cicely cried, the colour flaming up into her thin cheeks. "I might have guessed that. I might have known that when you were out a whole day, and had nothing to tell me on your return—and especially," she added, bitterly, "when you wish to make a secret of where you had been—I might have guessed that it was to Delicia Mainwaring!"

"You are enough to madden a saint, Cicely," Mr Stevens said, angrily, as Cicely rose from her seat. "I don't think it is surprising that I never tell you more than I can help."

Cicely did not reply; without one word she walked to the door, opened it, and departed.

When Mr Stevens heard her footfall overhead he rang the bell.

"Tell Jane to go to Mrs Stevens; she is not very well," he told the servant.

Ann gave the message; and cook hearing it, remarked, "I suppose as how he has been a-tormentin' her again, after leavin' her alone since

eleven o'clock this morning? And she, as looks as if she wanted care took of her from morn till night to keep her out of her grave!"

But as—mercifully perhaps—we do not know what is said and thought of us in the kitchen, Mr Stevens continued eating his dinner in peace; not enjoying it, perhaps, quite as much as he would otherwise have done, because of the storm that had broken over his head—for Mr Stevens had a nature that was essentially averse to storms. Another man, noting Cicely's delicate tired face, and remembering the bringing up she had had,—how that she had never known what it was not to have her own way in everything,—might have considered the other side of the question, and then come to the conclusion that more than bare justice ought to be meted out to this girl, who had of a sudden had the cares of life—of which one of the greatest, surely, is constant ill-health—thrust upon her, after nineteen years with no greater trial to encounter than Jessie's eager attempts to share the glories of her elder sister's throne. Another man, realising all this, might even, when he was in the right, have spared the fretful, spoilt girl the angry word, or more trying neglect, and have tried, through love and tenderness, to win her over—to see that, notwithstanding the real troubles that had befallen her, her duties could not be quite laid on one side. But this was a view of the case which would never have occurred to Cyril Stevens.

Indeed he was so occupied, whilst eating his solitary dinner, in reviewing his own side of the ques-

tion, that he quite forgot to wonder if there might possibly be another.

He had been happy at first—very happy—but when, owing to Cicely's ill-health, he had been obliged to give up all thoughts of her playing the part he intended for her, his scheme of life broke down; for beyond taking her about for the purpose of showing off as his wife the beautiful girl who had inspired his *chef-d'œuvre*, he had not had much idea of anything in common with her.

And in addition to the dispersing of the glamour which necessarily follows marriage, the fact of her being ill had made Cicely fretful and selfish, and less careful about pleasing others, so that she was in reality not possessed of the charms which had once made her so attractive.

Of course all this was hard on Cyril, who required, if he had but known it in time, a woman not weaker, but stronger than himself; but now, as he had chosen, surely he should have made the best of it; and if he had helped his wife to bear her burden, by kindness and consideration, he would in all probability have found his own considerably lightened. As it was, he did not fight against it—he was not a fighting man—but he slipped it off his shoulders, leaving it at the door of his uncomfortable home, and thus eased, went his way into the world, seeking the companionship he had discovered his wife had not to offer. And companionship he must have, in some form or another—he had always been accustomed to it; even in the old days at No. 39 he had been surrounded by an

atmosphere of cleverness and originality, which unfitted him for the constant society of a woman with whom, the artificiality removed, the small items of everyday life, the little worries and annoyances, were matters of the most supreme importance.

Thus it was it had come to pass that oftener and oftener as five o'clock came round Cyril Stevens found himself in Miss Mainwaring's drawing-room. And for old times' sake, Delicia was always glad to see him, glad to listen to his talk, though perhaps, if the truth had been known, she was not quite so unwavering in her attention as she once had been; but then her thoughts were not now so totally unoccupied as when Cyril Stevens first discovered what a perfect listener she was, and by the magic of his voice had taught the serious grey eyes to express the sympathy that before then had never troubled their cold calm.

"Good evening, Elizabeth! how late you are!"

"Make me welcome, nevertheless, and offer me a cup of your delicious tea, for I shall get none at home, and I assure you I stand sorely in need of refreshment."

"Why, what have you been doing?" Miss Mainwaring asked as she rang the bell.

And as they stand thus, you can note how Delicia's calm, gentle grace has blossomed into a fulness of beauty that her girlhood never knew; also that there it has paused, showing no signs of premature fading, as is the case with the girl so

much her younger who stands facing her. For to Elizabeth Stevens time has not brought rest and peace, as it should do, but her face in these two years has gained an anxious harassed expression, which is fast becoming habitual. The dark eyes have the look of one who is always watching for and expecting some news; and this anxiety, this watchfulness, has deepened the lines about the sensitive mouth, until to the casual observer she is a woman who has lived her life,—played out her part,—instead of what, counting by years alone, she might yet be—a girl to whom the romance has not yet come.

But no one ever thought that who knew her, though no one—not even Miss Mainwaring—was aware of the hidden story of which she was so certain; for not even during that month they spent together in Brittany, not in any of the long days since, during which warm affection had ripened into love, has Betty ever let one word fall which could betray to Delicia her own especial trouble. No; the confidence Mr Rayton had interrupted remained unconfided for ever. Perhaps his appearance suggested to Betty that possibilities might arise in the future which might lead her to regret her confidence,—but whatever may have been the cause, from that day forward she kept her own counsel.

“And what have you been doing,” Delicia questioned, “that has so exhausted you?”

“Mentally, not bodily, I have been visiting our brides and bridegrooms; and do you know, De-

licia," bending forward as she spoke, "there will be trouble at the Cyrils if they do not take care!"

"Why, what is wrong?" Delicia asked, in a startled voice.

"Everything," said Betty, comprehensively: "Cyril is cross and discontented, and Cicely is ill and disappointed—there," stretching out her hands, "you have the matter in a nut-shell; now mention a remedy."

I think if we could have looked into the two women's hearts at that moment, we should have heard a whisper of "poor Cicely" in Betty's, and of "poor Cyril" in Delicia's.

"Cyril is behaving very foolishly—very wrongly," Betty went on, severely, after that minute's pause. "You know, Delicia, I am not over-fond of that girl—I never was—but I really felt sorry for her to-day when I went in there and saw her looking so wretchedly ill and miserable. Tearful, of course,—but, under the circumstances, I think even that is pardonable; and there she had been alone for hours!"

Delicia flushed a little.

"Mr Stevens was here," she remarked.

"Oh, I daresay; and I am not surprised at it," Betty answered, candidly, "for, to tell you the truth, the house was a perfect pigsty, and Cicely looked not only ill and plain, but she was badly dressed!"

"Poor Cicely! it is hard for her. I always feared she would not prove a companion, in the higher sense of the word, for your brother."

"No; that was easily to be seen. Between our-

selves, I always thought her slightly idiotic, but still that is no excuse for him; he married her voluntarily—at least we were led to believe so—therefore he ought to treat her better now.”

“Poor girl! and such a child as she is too! It was such a sad pity that the baby died.”

“Well,” said Betty, rising and speaking impressively, “if he does not take care, she will die into the bargain, this time.”

“My dear Elizabeth!”

“I mean what I say,” Betty repeated; “and if you had seen her this afternoon you would have agreed with me. However, I am not going to let her die in peace; I intend offering myself as a visitor to-morrow.”

“That is good of you,” Delicia said, warmly; but there was something behind her words which prompted Betty to say, “You are quite right; it is a visit I shall *not* enjoy, for I have no fancy for the post of *confidante* to both husband and wife, and of letting the missiles intended for each other hit my inoffensive head. However, it is better to keep these little family discussions *in* the family, and so for the present I intend to take up my abode there—if they will have me, that is; but I do not think there is much doubt of it, as I think they are both craving to have some one to whom they can each say how disagreeable the other one is!”

Miss Mainwaring smiled. “Then in that case you had certainly better be the person to go, for we all know *you* can keep a secret!”

Betty flushed a little, and looked suspiciously to

where Delicia sat with head bent over her work, but there was nothing in her grave face to suggest any but the simplest meaning in her words.

"Yes," said Betty, taking up the thread of her discourse rather at random, "you know just as well as I do how I shall be made acquainted with the fact," speaking in Cyril's most mournful, self-pitying voice, "that Cicely, my dear Betty, is like all women," a gentle sigh—"a little fanciful about herself, and not quite so anxious as she should be to forget all her ailments to attend to my comforts; yesterday, Betty, I had to fetch down my own slippers! So different from what I had expected!"

Three notes of exclamation.

And then rapidly changing her tones to Cicely's fretful ones, "He does not love me any more. He does not care who he is with, so long as he is away from me. Oh," clasping her hands with a tragical air—"Oh, Betty, what a terrible thing it is to be a neglected wife!"

Miss Mainwaring could not help smiling. "If any one heard you, Betty——"

"They would never think, would they, that I am going to listen quite patiently and with interest to all this—am going to heal up the wounds, and make two who ought to be one, in love with one another again?"

"If you accomplish that," Miss Mainwaring said, "you will deserve the thanks of the community."

Betty walked very slowly homewards, and all the way she was thinking deeply. "I wonder if I have

done any good," she was saying to herself; "whether my delicately-veiled hint was understood by her? But I am afraid not. However, we cannot allow Cicely's happiness to be ruined because *she* happens to be too imaginative, and Cyril too fond of talking about himself—a luxury he cannot indulge in at home; and above all, dear, simple Delicia, whom I hope to keep single till Christopher is old enough to marry her, must not be permitted to be the match that fires the train.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WORLD IS FULL OF RUBS.

"Oft expectation fails, and most oft there
Where most it promises."

"WELL or ill, I intend to go." Cicely, with an angry flush on her cheek, was the speaker, Cyril and Betty her audience.

"Well, Cicely, if you will be so foolish, I must get Dr Jameson to forbid it."

"I suppose *you* are going?" questioned Cicely, suspiciously.

"If Betty wants me; but it is only a children's party, you know."

"I believe it is just because you are going that you are so anxious I should stay at home."

"Don't you think," interposed Betty, placidly, "that instead of our all losing our tempers over such a trifling subject, that it would be better to defer the discussion until a week hence, when perhaps Cicely may be so much better that she will quite enjoy a romp with the children, and be strong enough for the 'surprise' they have prepared for us?"

"Will there be no one else there, excepting the children?"

"Only those benighted beings that we have prevailed upon to come and amuse them."

"And they are?" queried Cicely, quietly, but the flush had not faded out of her cheeks.

"Nan and John, of course, and I hope Mr Rayton, if he does not play us false at the last minute, and——"

"Miss Mainwaring," announced the servant, opening the door.

"I knew it," Cicely said, in a low, indignant voice. For a second she hardly realised that the sentence had not been finished by the person who had begun it.

As Delicia entered the room, Cyril rose, and with an excuse went away, and the three ladies were left alone.

"Dear Cicely," Miss Mainwaring said, drawing a chair up to the sofa, "I am so grieved to hear of your being ill. I came to see if perhaps you would like a drive."

"No, thank you; I am not well enough to go out."

"You must find it so trying," Delicia went on, kindly, "lying here all day—you who never could bear being still."

"I find it *dull*," Cicely said, significantly, "as I am nearly always alone."

Delicia coloured a little, recalling Elizabeth's words the last time she had seen her, and guessing therefore the hidden meaning in Cicely's speech.

Cicely, perceiving the blush, misinterpreted it, and thought her arrow had hit the mark. After that, Miss Mainwaring's kind words fell on inattentive ears, and the conversation devolved almost entirely upon Elizabeth and Delicia.

"I am going to the club," Cyril said, putting his head in at the door; "can I do anything for you?"

"No, thank you."

"Can I give you a lift, Mr Stevens? I am going straight to Piccadilly, and should be so glad if you would go with me."

"It is very good of you," Cyril replied; "I should be most obliged."

At Miss Mainwaring's words Betty bent her eyes over her work to hide the aggravated look that she felt must be perceptible; and yet at the same time it was all so ludicrous. Looking at Delicia's grave grey eyes, which always looked so straightly and unwaveringly upon the world—eyes which were never raised in search of admiration, and which spoke so clearly of the honourable single-hearted woman to whom they belonged—eyes with which it was so impossible to couple the word coquetry,—it all seemed to a bystander so infinitely ludicrous.

And to a woman of experience, as was Elizabeth Stevens, the mere fact of the openness of the invitation would have been sufficient; but to poor, foolish Cicely—ah me! what spectres the jealous, the self-willed, and many other foolish people, can conjure up wherewith to frighten themselves!

Directly the door closed on the two offenders,

Cicely walked over to the window and watched them drive away, with what bitter, angry feelings at her heart none but those who have suffered the pangs of jealousy, either well or ill founded, can know. Betty watched her furtively through her glasses, but was afraid to speak, not being quite certain in her own mind what would be at once the wisest and kindest thing to say.

But Cicely soon gave her an opening. Returning to the sofa, and burying her face in the cushions, she broke out into wild sobs and tears. "You see the way he treats me, Betty: he would rather be with any one than with me," she cried, raising her tearful face. "He is never in the house, if he can help it, and I am neglected and miserable!"

"My dear Cicely," and Betty knelt down by the sofa, and took the girl's hands in hers, "I wonder if you ever think how silly it is to try and make yourself miserable with these imaginary troubles. *You* know Delicia Mainwaring just as well as I do: now, is it possible that, honestly—if you were judging of her and some one else's husband—that you think she is a woman whom any one could accuse of flirting?"

"Delicia Mainwaring was in love with Cyril, and tried to marry him," Cicely said, obstinately.

"Well, even if that is what you believe—which, Cicely, I doubt—Cyril married you, so there is very little present misery to be made even out of that view of the case."

"But he likes her," cried foolish Cicely, quitting common-sense and reverting to tears—"he likes her,

and she loves him, and between them they will break my heart!"

"Hearts are not so easily broken," said Elizabeth under her breath. "But, Cicely," speaking more cheerfully, "I cannot allow all this weeping and wailing, or Dr Jameson will not think much of me as a sick-nurse. Instead, sit up and dry your tears and let us talk."

Cicely did as she was told. She was still young enough to crave for human sympathy, and to feel her troubles were less when confided to another.

"You see, do you not," she said, "that I have a great deal to bear?"

"I see," Betty replied, "that you are ill, and that little annoyances are consequently much magnified. I see also that Cyril, like most men, not being able to do you any good, likes to go away and not come home more than is necessary; and I see, as you have been a great deal alone, that you have had little else to do but to lie here and imagine all sorts of unpleasant things: but we are going to alter all this."

And as Cicely shook her head, "Yes, we are. Invited or uninvited, I am going to stay here till next week, and then I hope, by taking a great deal of care of you, that you will be well enough to go to No. 39, if only for an hour or two; and after that frantic dissipation, I think you will not know yourself, you will feel so much better."

Cicely was quieter after that, and Betty flattered herself her words had taken effect, and went away with a lighter heart to dress for dinner.

But then she did not quite understand her sister-in-law, — did not quite realise how jealousy can feed upon itself—how night after night the poor, foolish, self-willed girl was counting up the hours till the 24th of December, when she should be able to go and judge for herself; though of what she was to judge she would have had some difficulty in stating.

But that there was something that she would find out, if she could only see them together for some time, she felt certain—a vague expressive phrase which carried a certain amount of comfort with it. And on this hope, if such it could be called, Cicely waited for those long ten days in a sort of sullen calmness, which was most irritating to her husband, and even annoyed Betty almost beyond enduring.

CHAPTER XXI.

EVERY WHY HATH A WHEREFORE.

"All of us have a cause
To wail the dimming of our shining star ;
But none can cure their harms by wailing them."

AFTER all Betty's hopes and promises, and Cicely's determination that nothing should keep her at home, when the afternoon of the 24th came round she herself was obliged to acknowledge, as she tossed feverishly in bed with a bad headache, that it was utterly impossible to think of going out.

Betty was really sorry for her, knowing the girl's disappointment, and noting the heavy eyes, as she stood by the bedside putting eau-de-Cologne on the hot forehead.

"I would stay, Cicely," she said, "only that I know what confusion there will be at home, and there is no one to whom I can well depute my duties."

"If it is just a *children's* party, they can amuse themselves."

"A children's party is too grand a name for it ;

there will only be a few friends of Susy's and Christopher's, but they will want some one all the same, to see that they have enough to eat, and prevent them from annoying father, so I think I must go; but I will come back to-morrow, if you like." Elizabeth said this a little reluctantly, not caring particularly about spending Christmas-day out of No. 39—a day to which both Nan and she had looked forward.

But Cicely did not notice the reluctance. "Miss Mainwaring will be there, of course," she said, a little spitefully. "Could not you depute your duties to her?"

"I am afraid not," Betty replied, cheerfully. "I think she would rather sit quietly up-stairs with Nan and father, than keep the peace and invent amusements for children down-stairs."

"Are *you* going, Cyril? *You* will not be wanted," Cicely went on, turning her eyes towards the corner where Mr Stevens stood leaning against the window looking out into the street. He did not turn his head to answer, so missed the worried, fretful look in Cicely's face, and the imploring expression of Betty's eyes, which he might easily have interpreted into a suggestion that he had better stay at home.

"Oh yes, I shall go for an hour or two, but I shall be back early."

Cicely said nothing further: perhaps she determined to reserve her persuasions until she was alone with her husband; but if so, her hopes were frustrated, for Cyril, immediately after speaking, strolled out of the room. Betty followed him,

thinking, in all probability, he would wish to return and have a few words alone with his wife before starting; but Cyril was careful to avoid any chance of tears and remonstrances, and Cicely was unaware of their movements until the rattle of a cab leaving the door revealed the fact that they had departed. Not a word passed between the brother and sister during their drive; Cyril looked out of the window the whole time, and Betty did not disturb his meditations.

Arrived at No. 39, there was much rejoicing over Elizabeth Stevens' appearance.

"O Betty, I am so glad to see you!" cried Susy, darting forward to meet her sister; "I was so afraid that——" And then, seeing Cyril, she paused, and concluded quietly, "that Cicely would keep you."

"And have you been good, Susy, and fulfilled your promise to me, and done everything for me you could?"

"Yes, Betty," replied Nelly in her low voice, as she also entered the lighted hall—a slighter and more fragile-looking Nelly even than we knew two years ago; "so all you have to do is to go up to your room and change your dress—everything is quite ready."

And then Nelly, who never forgot any one, moved to Cyril's side and asked tenderly after Cicely, and sympathised about her disappointment.

"And yours too, Cyril; for I know how sad it must be for you to go out without her;" until with a lighter heart, at the knowledge that some one felt he was a little bit of a martyr, Cyril went

up-stairs. "Yes," he was thinking to himself, "it is hard on me."

"O Nan, dear, how glad I am to see you! come up with me to my room, and tell me how you are. Now children, if you all pursue me in this fashion I shall never be dressed."

"How long will you be?" shouted a chorus.

"A quarter of an hour if I am left quite alone with Nan. Now, Nan, that we are out of sight and hearing of the mob, let me tell you that our worst fears have been realised, and that I, all impossible as it may appear to those who have known me during my long and eventful career, have of late been called upon to play the rôle of *confidante* to the jealous wife."

"My dear Betty, what do you mean? Why, who on earth is she jealous of?"

"Delicia Mainwaring."

Mrs Fullerton laughed merrily.

"Even thus did the *confidante* laugh when first the poisonous tale was whispered into her ears; but for these last few days she has begun to think that perhaps, after all, there may be two sides to the question, difficult as they are at first to perceive."

"You don't mean to say——?"

"No, Nan, I don't mean to say that I have been obliged to decide that Delicia Mainwaring is a designing woman; but, taking the other side of the question, I have been led, painfully against my will, to suppose that our brother is rather a dependent sort of man, and that the fair Cicely

is not quite a strong enough crutch to support all his moral weakness, so now I fear he is looking about for another. What is agitating me is, ought I to point out to him that a married man has no business to go about the world looking for crutches, but should be content with those he finds at home?"

"Oh no, that would never do, Betty. It is always such a terrible mistake to interfere between a husband and wife."

"My dear, I bow to your superior wisdom. In your case '*experientia*' has evidently '*doceted*'—or whatever is the past tense of that sage little sentence."

"I have had *no* experience," Mrs Fullerton replied, hotly, "I am thankful to say," her pretty eyes flashing, and the pink flying up into her cheeks. "You know, Betty, that John——"

"Spare me," cried Betty, "dear Nan, if you love me—spare me a dissertation on John! If only his bad points are as satisfactory as his good ones——"

"I should not like to mention his bad points," Mrs Fullerton replied, her head thrown well back, "even if he had any."

Betty laughed at the speech and the reservation.

"Just fancy," Nan said, stopping short in the little passage—"just fancy my telling even you that I was jealous of any one! Is it not incomprehensible?"

"Ah," Betty replied, "perhaps so. But then you are *you*, and Mrs Stevens is, or rather was,

Cicely Arbuthnot, which just makes all the difference. But there are the children, so I must go. Yes, Susy—coming, coming! Nan, you had better make a harbour of refuge of the drawing-room; I will go to you there directly I have settled matters satisfactorily down-stairs.”

Nan did as she was advised, and left Betty to face alone the children, whose shrieks of merriment greeted their ears as they went down-stairs; but she could not resist a smile as, on opening the drawing-room door, she saw her brother and Miss Mainwaring alone in the farthest window; Cyril's head bent, and his soft voice so low pitched that his words could be heard by no one else in the room but the woman with wide grey eyes. An hour later, Betty opening the door, having made her escape for a few moments from the throng below, had a view also of the *tableau vivant* in the window, and being sharper-sighted than Nan, despite her blindness, perceived that there was a spectator of the *tableau* who did not seem to enjoy it much. Mr Rayton, seated by Nan, and striving to keep up a desultory conversation with her, but ever and anon casting side glances to the group, caught Betty's eye at once.

“Miss Mainwaring—Delicia!” she said, pausing just inside the room, and looking questioningly about her; and then, deliberately putting on her spectacles, she took a survey of the party. “Do you know, Delicia,” she said, moving across to her side, quite heedless of Cyril's frowns and angry looks, “that I think you are behaving in a very

mean manner? I asked you here, and you agreed to come, distinctly to amuse children. Cyril, though appearances are sometimes against him, is *not* a child." Was it possible, Betty wondered, that in the usually calm grey eyes lifted to hers there was an anxious expression, as if Delicia were not quite content—she who usually was so apparently unmoved, and to whom the sound of Cyril Stevens' voice had once been so dear?

"I have been very remiss, Elizabeth," she said, rising to her feet at once, as if to avoid any possible lengthening of the *tête-à-tête*. "Take me away, and let me try to make up for lost time."

"Don't be taken away under false pretences, Miss Mainwaring. Betty does not want you."

"Yes I do, Cyril, though I am sorry to contradict you. I came up on purpose to fetch her, as the children feel confident that she will come down and see their charade, which appears to be the form the surprise is going to take. Do you mind, Delicia?"

"No, Elizabeth; I should like it." And she turned away, perhaps to show Miss Stevens how ready she was to go, perhaps to gain a view of the farther end of the room, where a grey-headed, broad-shouldered man was leaning against the chimney-piece, talking to Mr Stevens, senior.

"What a good thing it will be, Betty," said Cyril, severely, "when you learn that it is both polite and kind to leave people alone when they look as if they were enjoying themselves!"

"But when they are not?"

"That is not the question, as you know, for I *was* enjoying myself."

"Yes," said Betty, musingly; "but you see I put my question in the plural number, so it is scarcely conclusive to answer it in the singular."

"What do you mean?" questioned Cyril, in a quick, annoyed voice. "I do not understand you."

But without heeding his words, Betty turned away to join Miss Mainwaring. "Come, Delicia," she said, "you are the only person that I dare ask, except father, and he seems occupied; and Christopher particularly wanted you. It will be all over in half an hour, and then we will come back here and have a little music."

"Don't apologise, Elizabeth; I am really *glad* to go;" and there was the earnestness of truth in Miss Mainwaring's voice.

"Cyril *is* rather a bore at times," Betty remarked, without looking at her companion, but aware of her blushes nevertheless. "He talks so very much of himself."

And then, Delicia having no reply ready, she opened the door leading into the dining-room, where the children were assembled awaiting them.

"No danger there," were the words running through Betty's brain, as she sat looking on at Christopher's carefully-got-up theatricals. "*She* is quite safe; if she ever did care for him, it is a thing of the past now—quite over and done with! He fatigues her *terribly*." And Betty smiled to herself, and then remembered that she ought to be thinking of the scene before her, for that very

shortly she would be called upon to guess the word.

Just as the curtain drew up for the last scene, the door opened, and a man put his head into the darkened room.

"You can have a seat in the front row," said Susy, in a low voice, she being doorkeeper. "You will find Betty and Miss Mainwaring there."

"Is that you, Mr Rayton?" Betty inquired. "Do come—that is, if you can grope your way. Darkness is apparently part of the performance. You are only just in time to exert your giant intellect to guess the word that all this is to represent."

"Be quiet, Betty," said an angry muffled voice from the invisible regions that lay behind the stage.

"Christopher, your will is law; but you should not address your audience (especially when they have paid sixpence for their places) by *name*."

There was another indignant murmur in the distance, but the words were inaudible. Having given himself a few moments to cool down from his anger, Christopher, clothed in a white sheet, which considerably interfered with his comfort in walking, marched tragically forth from his hiding-place, and with great dignity, mounted on a wooden kitchen-chair, proceeded to deliver Mark Antony's famous oration over dead Cæsar.

On the ground beneath him lay what Betty in a whisper informed Delicia was the croquet-box, and gathered about it was "the mob," as represented by Jack and Bob, and some two or three

other young Stevens's, who gazed, with many outward signs of woe, alternately at the box and the orator; and above them, Christopher declaimed over Cæsar's wrongs in most striking fashion, the boy being a born actor.

Then the scene over, the small mob, with its bare legs and sandals, lifted up the croquet-box and bore it away, whilst the heated man of the People, in a somewhat ungraceful manner, scrambled down from his elevated position, and followed it off the stage at a respectful distance.

"Methinks the box was over-light for the great man it contained. Mr Rayton, did you observe how it seemed to spring up to meet the mob? They should have left the balls and mallets in it."

"It is a shame to criticise, Miss Stevens. How well that boy speaks!"

And then every one clapped and called for the actors.

"I have guessed the word, Delicia."

"No, I am sure you haven't," cried Mark Antony, angrily, pausing in his bows and misunderstandings with his toga to frown at his sister.

"It is a pity the ears of the actors are so sharp, is it not? But I thought you would have been so glad to hear I had guessed it."

"Not you, Betty—any one else may," retorted Christopher; "but I am sure you have got one of those mean girls to tell it to you!"

"Abuse is not argument, Christopher," said Betty, composedly, "and I now appeal to the audience. Is this a seemly way for an actor to behave towards

a person who paid honestly for her admittance? Now Mr Rayton, let me tell you what the other two scenes were, and see if you can guess. Delicia, I am sure you have not an idea, have you?"

"Not an idea," repeated Miss Mainwaring.

"The first scene, Mr Rayton, was also Shakespearian,—the part of Hamlet where that unhappy young man first becomes aware of the fact that his father is wandering about the earth. The second was a *tableau* out of that memorable book, 'Elizabeth; or, the Exiles of Siberia:' in it Christopher sat aloft on the kitchen-chair, which had been previously hoisted in a most dangerous way on to an ottoman, as the Emperor of all the Russias, a perfect blaze of gold and silver paper. The last act you have seen. Well, the word is," stooping forward and saying it in a lower tone, "Cæsar—see Czar—I am sure of it. Mr Rayton, do call out and ask them if it is so."

Philip did so. "Is it Cæsar?" he called; and a shout of "Yes" being returned, there were again cries for the reappearance of the actors.

"Well done, Christopher!" Mr Rayton said. "I think we were very clever to guess it."

"Yes; I thought it was a puzzler," replied Christopher, modestly and yet withal triumphantly, looking round as he spoke.

"Allow me to congratulate you, Christopher," said Betty, as they rose to find their way out of the room, "on your grand triumph over all difficulties—spelling included."

"We have come back for a little music, mother,"

Betty remarked, as they all re-entered the drawing-room; "we feel as if we required that common everyday refreshment to bring us back to earth, after the high regions of Shakespeare and the drama into which of late we have been lifted up."

"Why, what have you been doing?" Nan questioned. And whilst Betty explained, gentle Mrs Stevens seated herself at the piano, and proceeded to refresh them, as Elizabeth said, with one of Schubert's sweet, plaintive airs.

"Well, it was a shame of you not to tell *me*," Nan said. "I should have enjoyed it."

"That *is* hard, when we are all feeling perfect martyrs for having been; and expected to hear nothing but praise of our goodness in going, and our unselfishness in leaving all of you in peace by the fire. Oh, how cold that room was!" Betty concluded with a shiver, moving nearer, as she spoke, to the blaze.

She did not speak again for some minutes, but stood leaning against the mantel-shelf, her eyes fixed on the dancing flames, listening to her mother's dreamy, tender music. And as she thus stood, back to her was borne the remembrance of a very different night to this, when she had stood in much the same attitude, listening to the quick impatient tones of a man's voice. "How long was it ago? Why, it must be *years*, surely!" and into her eyes stole a wearied look which softened them.

"Miss Stevens, I offer a shilling for your thoughts. They must have been happy ones, and therefore well worth hearing, judging by the contented look

on your face, and the fact that I spoke to you a minute ago, and you did not hear me. Fancy Miss Stevens caught in a day-dream! I am sure it would be well worth the outlay of a shilling."

"Put your hand in your pocket, Mr Rayton, and prepare yourself to lose immediately, for my thoughts are certainly for sale at that price. I was just thinking, reminded no doubt by the music, of a man who once told me, at one of our parties, that he thought the only good of a sonata was, that it made so much noise, that it was a capital cover for conversation."

"You are determined not to be caught. And was it *really* the remembrance of the speech of that poetical person—who, I am afraid, had no soul for music—that made me determine your thoughts must be worth purchasing?"

"Yes, Mr Rayton; and I really am obliged to you for telling me all this, for I shall now know what to think of the next time I go to a photographer's; on the same principle that a girl told me once, it suited her face to look plaintive, and that after a great deal of trouble she had discovered, by imagiuing she had toothache at the moment she was being photographed, that the much-desired woe-begone expression was obtained."

Mr Rayton laughed. "To turn the conversation," rather abruptly I confess, "to myself—always a more interesting subject than any other—I fear I am going away."

"Where to? You speak as seriously as if you meant for ever."

"To America. I fancy I shall be away about three months."

"That is rather a sudden resolution, is it not?"

"Yes."

Just then there was a little movement in the room. Nelly was about to play on the violin, Nan rose to help her, and Cyril immediately pounced upon her vacant chair, which was close to that of Miss Mainwaring. Betty noted all this, and she was also aware that other eyes noted it too.

"Come, Mr Rayton," she said, "there is no occasion for us to stand—let us sit down; and now do tell me what this all means. When did you make up your mind to go?"

"To-night." Mr Rayton spoke a little absently, his eyes still upon the fair-haired woman in the distance. But after he had thus spoken, he turned his chair a little away, so as to shut out that corner of the room from his sight, unless he turned his head, and took up the thread of his conversation with Betty.

These two had become great friends since that night of Cyril's wedding, when Mr Rayton had caught a glimpse, or fancied he had, of the real Elizabeth Stevens. He had turned away with something like dislike then; but afterwards, as he got to know her better, and to see her as she always was—just her everyday amusing, bright, quick self, all the realities of her life carefully hidden away—he had discovered what a capital companion she was.

If only we can contrive to keep ourselves hidden, and present to the world just a sham surface on

which it can cast its own shadow, it will always be content with us ; but woe betide us when we let our own tragedies, which are eating our hearts out, creep upwards and usurp the world's place ! and this no one knew better than Elizabeth Stevens.

"Are you going for business or pleasure?" she asked.

"Partly one, and partly the other. Some one is required to go to America, and I have no doubt they would send me if they knew that I should like it ; and I want to get away from England for a time."

"Why?"

"Oh, I am tired of it all," he said, abruptly ; and then added, "England is a place to live 'out of' in the spring. I shall get back when it is just beginning to be bearable."

Shortly after that every one rose, Mr Rayton being the first to say good night. Betty wondered, as she came down-stairs with Nan, cloaked and hooded preparatory to her homeward drive, what was the real reason of the proposed journey. What could it be ? But that it was somehow caused by those two low-toned conversations, of that she was certain. The plot was decidedly thickening. When she and Nan reached the hall, all the others were already standing there.

"Father, will *you* walk home with Delicia?" Betty said, quickly.

"Yes, I am prepared for escort duty," Mr Stevens replied ; and Delicia then turned, with something like gratitude expressed in her eyes, to say good night to Betty.

"I was waiting to walk home with you," Cyril remarked.

"But I should not think of asking you to do that," Miss Mainwaring replied. "I am afraid, as it is, poor Cicely has had a dull evening. Indeed, Mr Stevens, I do not require an escort at all, for Grey is here waiting for me."

"My dear Miss Mainwaring, how you can look me in the face and make such a proposition surprises me;" and Mr Stevens took her hand in his and placed it on his arm. "Come; are you warm enough? O Nan, my dear, here is your cab. Excuse me one moment, Miss Mainwaring," and Mr Stevens turned round to take his pretty daughter, of whom he was greatly and justly proud, down the steps. In the second's pause that ensued, whilst Delicia stood waiting just outside the door, in the clear, frosty starlight, Mr Rayton moved forward, but none of the others, saving Elizabeth, heard his words.

"Miss Mainwaring."

She turned her head with a slight start.

"Will you be at home to-morrow afternoon? May I come to tea?"

"Yes, do," she said gently; and then, in a quick, impulsive manner, most unlike her usual mode of speaking, "No, not to-morrow—Mr Stevens will be there."

Such a wave of colour swept over her fair face when she had spoken—the construction that might be put upon her words coming over her—that,

standing thus in her black dress in the silvery moonlight, with drooping eyes and crimsoned cheeks, Elizabeth watching her, for the first time fully realised what a beautiful woman Delicia Mainwaring was. "She only wants waking up," was her inmost thought. And then she stood quite still, and heard the man's voice say in a low tone, "The day after, then," and made a mental note that the day after Miss Mainwaring should be left in peace, so far as visits from No. 39 were concerned ; and also noted, for future consideration, the fact that Cyril intended to drink tea at No. 1 on Christmas-day. "A fact, my dear Cyril, which, if you have the slightest fraction of the wisdom of the serpent, you will keep to yourself," was her summing up, as she lighted a candle and went up to bed.

Mr Rayton, walking slowly homewards, despite the cold, was not at all in an enviable frame of mind. "What a fool I have been !" was his uppermost feeling. "What a fool ! Why, I might have been eighteen instead of eight-and-thirty ! However, I must go now—at once—and stay away as long as ever I can. I knew it the moment I saw her talking to that conceited Cyril Stevens. I only blame myself now for not having gone before ; it might have saved me a heartache. After all, though, it might have been worse," he thought, as he turned the key in the lock. "*She* might have guessed something, and I should not have liked *that* ; but as for me, I am hardened enough surely, or at any

rate I ought to be. I have lived down a good many things in my life, so now I must set to work and live down this."

But this was only one side of the question ; and Philip Rayton, entering the dark passage of the house where he lodged, and groping helplessly about for matches, did not even pause to wonder whether it was possible that there might be yet another.

CHAPTER XXII.

FATAL, FAIRE GIFT TO ME.

"It came with silent, owly flight,
In the still quiet of the night:
I heard the wind, I heard the brook,
But the love slid into my soul like light."

"GOING out again, Cyril?" asked Cicely in a fretful voice, raising herself on the sofa, as her husband glanced into the drawing-room the following evening.

"My dear, why not? You surely do not object to my going down to the club?"

"O Cyril, it is Christmas-day! I do think you might stay at home."

Betty, reading over the fire, thought so too; however, she did not utter her thoughts aloud, but rose and moved quickly towards the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Cyril, sharply.

"For the third volume of my story," his sister made reply, without turning her head.

His question sounded rather like a cry for help, and as such Betty interpreted it. "But I do not

really think," she said to herself, her lips the while parting in an amused smile, "that I am bound to save him from his wife."

Cyril felt annoyed—unreasonably annoyed—with Elizabeth when she closed the door. It seemed to him that he was being left just when he stood most in need of help, and that was not at all agreeable to his ideas—for a shield in time of danger was always his first thought. He hated scenes and storms—or as he himself would have put it, he valued domestic peace above every other earthly blessing. But then his idea of obtaining domestic peace was to be quietly allowed his own way in everything,—and more even than that—that it should be delicately insinuated to him at the same time that he was most unselfish and considerate, for the pricks of conscience were as much to be warded off as any other annoyance.

Now this was a *role* that Cicely was not at all prone to play. She was not one to suffer neglect quietly when it interfered with her own comfort, for the sake of offering balm to Cyril's conscience—and of this her husband was quite aware.

So, painfully conscious that a storm was impending—a storm in which unpleasant words might be uttered, which would tend to embitter his whole evening—it was with a most angry feeling in his heart that he saw the door close on Betty, and found himself alone in the room with his wife.

"Father and Jessie are coming this evening," was Cicely's first remark, "so you ought to stay in."

"I think that is rather a reason against it," Cyril replied, lightly; "of course I would not have thought of leaving you if you had been quite alone"—and at the moment of speaking he really believed that his words were true. "In fact, I daresay you would prefer my room to my company, if you really owned to what you would like."

"No, I should not," Cicely retorted sharply, raising her voice a little; "and you know it. I think you are behaving unkindly to me, and most slightly to my father—not that either of those considerations are likely to weigh heavily with you. However, I shall tell them that you found the society of the club more amusing."

"I do not think that is a kind way of speaking, Cicely; neither do I think that a woman has much self-respect who complains, even to her own family, that her husband is wanting in attention to her and hers. And," after a pause—Cicely evidently meanwhile meditating a disagreeable reply—"you know such want of attention may be construed by an impartial judge into showing that if the husband was not all he should be, perhaps the wife was not either."

This was a crushing retort, and for a second it silenced Cicely, who was accustomed only to Cyril's way of slipping out of the duties he did not care about—not openly stating an opinion about them—and in that moment's pause Cyril made his way to the door, feeling that for once he had had the best of it, and that having had the last word, he could now leave, carrying away with him

the pleasing sensation that he had given a well-deserved reproof must judiciously, and with a light, easy conscience of his own—so easy is it, in blaming another, to forget that we ourselves may have been a little guilty also.

But he was not doomed to escape so easily.

Cicely soon recovered her senses and voice, and though Mr Stevens took refuge in silence, he could not avoid hearing the greater portion of the shower of sharp, angry words raining down upon him.

But he made no reply ; being bent upon taking his own way, he knew there would be no use trying to soothe her ; and in the midst of her anger Cicely became suddenly aware that the door had closed behind her husband, and that she was alone, which served to check her, with the sensation that cold water had been thrown in her face. Before she had quite made up her mind whether to run after him or not, the shutting of the hall-door told her that he was beyond her reach.

Cicely told her father, as she had threatened, that the reason of Cyril's absence was, that he preferred the society of his club to that of his wife and her family ; but old Mr Arbuthnot took her speech in a half-playful sense, not noting the bitter tone in which it was uttered. Not so Jessie.

"Father," she said, as they drove home, "do you think Cicely is happy?"

"Happy, my dear ! Of course she is. What do you mean?" he added, a little uneasily.

"I don't think so. She looks wretched, and——"

"She is ill, my dear ; but as for anything else, it

is impossible. Did she not marry Cyril for love? They were devoted to one another."

"*Were,*" Jessie insisted; "that is a very different thing."

"I wish, Jessie," Mr Arbuthnot said, rousing himself, and speaking rather irritably, "that you would be more careful in what you state. It is quite wrong of you to say such things on supposition, for you know how it worries me, even though I am certain that there is no truth in this; for if Cicely were unhappy, I should have been the first person to find it out."

Jessie had never been remarkable for tact, and here was a fresh instance that she had not even yet acquired very much of that useful quality; for her father, usually so placid and easy-going, was evidently thoroughly vexed, and all to no purpose. But notwithstanding Mr Arbuthnot's vexation and disbelieving words, Jessie remained unconvinced. "She is *not* happy," she said, shaking her head wilfully, as she went up to her own room; "I am certain of it."

Mr Rayton remained faithful to his promise, and at four o'clock on the day after Christmas-day he entered the drawing-room of No. 1. He was not even yet quite certain in his own mind whether he was acting rightly and wisely in coming.

All the previous day, at intervals, he had half thought of writing instead, but, nevertheless, here he was; and when Delicia turned her serious grey eyes upon him, with a look of welcome he had

learnt to know so well, he rejoiced that he had adhered to his original determination. But he had made up his mind before entering that this was to be but an ordinary visit—a half-hour's call; there was to be no lingering on, letting the time slip insensibly away in this pleasant, old-fashioned room, scented with lavender and *pot-pourri*, the firelight flickering on to the sad-coloured pictures above, and lighting up below the fair-haired woman with the grave eyes.

No; all this would be fraught with danger, and words might be said which could never be forgotten, and which could only tend to build up a wall between them which would preclude even the possibility of a friendship which he yet hoped it might be his some day to enjoy. And Mr Rayton was not a Cyril Stevens, who would enjoy each moment as it came, without contemplating consequences—a man who would contentedly sit down and play with fire, and then cry out and blame the whole world that he had been burned.

So he carefully avoided any personal topics; and very shortly after he had finished his tea, rose to go.

It was not until he was standing up that he contrived to say the words that he had come with the intention of saying; and after all, he brought them out in a jerky, unnatural manner. "I am going away, Miss Mainwaring."

"Going away," she repeated, "out of town?"

"Not only that, but out of England. To America, in fact; so this is really 'Good-bye.'"

And as she made no reply, "I should like, before I go," he went on, standing in front of her, and looking into the steady eyes upraised to his, "to thank you for many, many pleasant hours passed here——" He paused. "I have enjoyed them more than I can tell you. You believe me?" he added, his voice sinking a little.

"Yes," she replied, gravely; "of course I believe you; and—I am glad to have given you pleasure."

"It was more than pleasure," he went on, speaking low and earnestly: "it has been rest, happiness—all that a man ever craves for;" and then, checking himself abruptly, "But I must go. I am late already," holding out his hand.

She rose then, and placed her hand in his. "Good-bye," she said, quietly.

Did he expect her to say anything more? we may wonder. It might almost be thought so, for he held the hand in his for a second, as if waiting, and a little impatient sigh escaped him. But she did not speak again.

"Good-bye—Delicia," he said, and his voice lingered a little over the syllables of her name; then he dropped her hand, and walked straight away, without one backward glance. He congratulated himself, when he stood in the Square, that he had fought his battle so well—that he had made good his retreat before it was too late; but it never once crossed his mind to wonder whether the whole burden was to be borne by him, or whether of necessity a portion of it had not fallen also to the share of the woman he was leaving.

Miss Mainwaring did not move after Mr Rayton had left her. She stood quite still, her hands lightly clasped, looking straight before her. And as she thus stood, she understood, at length, what it was that had befallen her. In that moment when Philip Rayton took her hand in his and said her name, the veil was torn away that had hidden her secret for so long, and she knew that she loved him. She had been learning the lesson so carefully, so gradually, for these last two years, that she herself had been unaware how thoroughly completed her task was; and now that she at length discovered how perfectly she had mastered her part, all there was to do was to acknowledge that the time had been wasted—that any other occupation would have eventually caused her less pain. For with the recognition of her own feelings had come the knowledge that for some reason—some good reason, she felt sure, for her faith in Philip no seeming contradictions could shake—something stood between them. What it was she did not distress herself with striving to find out—suffice it, there was a barrier; for her woman's heart told her, all unlearned as it was in such matters, that Philip, if it had been possible, would ere this have overstepped the boundaries that lie between friendship and love. All this and much more she thought over, standing motionless as he had left her, in her firelit room; and despite the farewell she had just said, there was more joy than sorrow in her heart. For whatever might come, she loved him; though she should never see him more, yet now, and for ever, she would

have a memory which would tend to brighten lonely hours ; for Delicia Mainwaring was not one whom a love-story—even an unfinished one—would ever render selfish and fretful. On the contrary, even in those first sad moments she felt as if the sun's rays had at length touched her, and melted all the frozen-up tenderness in her heart. She could have laughed at the remembrance of the mixture of friendship and pity which she had in the old days felt for Cyril Stevens, and had dignified by the name of love.

The experience of an hour had taught her so much more than she had been able to learn in all the lonely eight-and-twenty years of her life.

But the reaction came later on, when she realised that Philip's farewell had meant that even his friendship must be denied her ; when sitting alone through that long evening, she understood what it would be like never to see him again, or hear his pleasant voice. Then, I think, calm unimpassioned Delicia Mainwaring suffered as only a woman who had lived the life she had done, with no especial joy or grief to mark it—a woman who had not frittered away her love on a thousand different objects, could suffer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WORDS CUT DEEPER THAN SWORDS.

“But, in truth,
There are worse losses than the loss of youth.”

THERE are occasional pauses in life when nothing seems to occur to mark the flight of time ; and then, again, there are periods when important events follow so fast upon one another, that we are incapable at the moment of attributing the exact amount of importance to each. Afterwards, it is easier to see how, in the lull before the storm, we were slowly but none the less surely preparing ourselves for that which was to follow : weakening our defences, pulling out, one by one, the stones through which, later on, the storm was to obtain entrance, or building up a stronghold against the time of trouble.

Such a pause had now come to those whose fortunes we have been following,—a pause for the sowing of the seed, the harvest of which had yet to be reaped.

“Good night, Delicia ; I am so sorry father is out. Shall I send a servant across with you ?”

"Oh no, thank you, it is not in the least necessary. Good night," and Miss Mainwaring went forth from No. 39 into the fresh April evening.

The clock of St Margaret's struck half-past nine as she slowly crossed the Square—slowly, because her mind was full of what Betty had just been telling her of Cicely. Of her fancies and tempers; of Cyril's increasing unhappiness; of the certain misery they were laying up for themselves. "She was not suited to him," Miss Mainwaring was thinking. "I always feared it." And with the natural loyalty of a woman towards a man she has once loved, I think even Delicia Mainwaring, sensible as she was, was quietly deciding that the whole fault lay on one side.

But she had not let this sentiment bias her conversation with Mr Stevens. She had striven at times, when he was sitting over his afternoon tea, to suggest that if he were more lenient to Cicely's failings, it would be better; that she was ill and low-spirited, and consequently more prone to take offence. And single-hearted Delicia Mainwaring had hoped some good might come of her words, whilst thus administering wholesome advice in the very smallest doses, Cyril only being capable of taking it in that form; and remained unaware that the remedy was worse than the disease—nay, was in great part the origin of the disease itself.

So Delicia persevered, remaining ignorant the while of the fact that her name was the basis of every quarrel between the husband and wife, Cicely always sending down word she was too ill

to see her when she called, and that day by day they were drifting farther and farther apart,—all on account of Cyril's predilection for afternoon tea at 1 Anne Square.

Miss Mainwaring had reached her own doorstep, when she became aware of a familiar figure approaching her.

"Mr Stevens?" she said inquiringly, as, unheeding of her presence, Cyril was about to pass her; and at her words he was obliged to look up and stop, although apparently such had not been his previous intention. But at the sound of the familiar voice Cyril paused irresolutely.

"You are late," Miss Mainwaring remarked, as he did not immediately speak; "are you going to 39?"

"No, no," he said, undecidedly—"no, I am not going anywhere." And then, "Are you going home? May I come in for a quarter of an hour?"

"Yes, do. Only will not Cicely——"

"No; Cicely is all right," he interrupted, and with a nervous attempt at a laugh; "Cicely will be only too glad to get rid of me!"

"That is nonsense," said Delicia, gravely; "but I have no doubt she will not be very anxious if you are a little later than usual."

Then the door was opened, and Miss Mainwaring preceded her visitor up-stairs.

When the lights on the drawing-room fell on Mr Stevens, Delicia was quite startled. "How ill you

look!" she exclaimed, as he sank down into the arm-chair and leant wearily back.

"Yes, I am ill," he said, pushing his hair off his forehead; "at least I am wearied and exhausted, and have a terrible headache."

All Delicia's womanly sympathies were aroused in a moment. It is curious how with nearly all women it is the same thing,—they can witness a man's *mental* sufferings, themselves the while perfectly unmoved—can even on occasion make use of the dagger with their own hands that will destroy in him all that makes life worth having, and yet be perfectly wretched if they see him with a headache. So Miss Mainwaring rang the bell for a glass of wine, and watched him drink it, her heart aching the while over his altered appearance, his white, haggard face, and the lines that care had drawn in these two years about his eyes and the sensitive mouth.

"Ah, this is comfort," he said, as he put the glass down and leant back in his chair. And then of a sudden, leaning forward in the attitude that his listener knew so well, he began pouring forth the history of his woes.

"*I* am wretched; *Cicely* is wretched; everything is going wrong. This evening came the climax: there was a battle-royal, at the end of which she told me she never wished to see me again; and with those last words we parted."

"And," asked Delicia, hesitating, "what were you about to do when I met you?"

"I do not know," with a gesture of impatience.

"I was going away — anywhere — what does it matter so that I am out of the way?"

"Going to leave her? Going to leave your *wife*, ill as she is, just because you have had a quarrel?" cried Delicia, indignantly.

"It is for her happiness," Cyril replied, sullenly.

And then Miss Mainwaring was really alarmed at the responsibility thrust upon her, for in three years she had learnt to understand Cyril Stevens, and she knew that in all probability the result of this evening's conversation would make or mar his whole after-life. For a weak man roused is always dangerous, seeing that obstinacy is his idea of strength. So with all her power she strove to force him out of the narrow groove of self; to think of, and pity Cicely's weakness; to remember what she had been to him in the days when he had persuaded her to give herself into his keeping, and for the sake of that love, which had then crowned their lives, not to fail her at the first trial.

"If there is anything to forgive, you are the one to forgive," she urged; and there she touched a right chord, for Cyril was in no state to have it driven home to him that he was the one to blame.

All Delicia's usual shyness had vanished under the influence of the great importance of the matter that was at stake. The tears stood in her eyes, as with all the strength of her strong nature, all the earnestness of her loyal purpose, she pleaded with this man, who had once been so dear to her, to return to his home. "Think of the shame and the misery that you are laying up for her," she said.

"Fancy poor, pretty Cicely's name—your wife's name—in every one's mouth—the name of a woman whose husband had deserted her!"

And she conquered.

Cyril Stevens, wavering between right and wrong, stirred into momentary enthusiasm by the single-hearted, honourable woman before him, forsook his original intention, and gave back a faint echo to her courageous words.

"You have saved me from myself," he said, smiling—that sweet, sad smile that had once gone nigh to break Delicia's heart; "I will go home, and," hesitatingly, "no one will ever know?"

"No one," said Delicia, "except myself, will ever know that on a certain April night, for a few minutes, you fought a battle between right and wrong—only for a few minutes; of that I am certain—and the fight is over now. See," pointing to the clock which was on the stroke of eleven, "how late it is!"

"Yes, I will go," he said, rising; and Delicia was glad to notice that even in this last hour his expression had improved—that he looked less careworn, less harassed than when she had met him in the Square, walking along with eyes bent on the ground, meditating treachery in his heart.

"Yes, I will go," and then, with that sweet smile which revealed so clearly all the weak lines about his effeminate mouth, "and if you care to hear such words from me, I think that you are the best and truest woman I ever met—a woman that it does a man good to meet!"

Verily there *was* a charm about Cyril Stevens that it is difficult to understand. Delicia felt her eyes filling with tears as he stood before her, even though the rose-coloured light through which she used to view him had long since faded, and she knew him exactly as he was—all his faults and weaknesses most clearly revealed; but in that moment when, through her strength, he had won the victory, I think she was blind to the remembrance of how she had blamed him during all these past months for the mistakes she had seen him daily making, and only saw in him a man who had conquered an unworthy desire to flee from the difficulties which surrounded him. And of course a conqueror always is in some measure a hero.

"Good-bye," she said, calmly, though her eyes were still a little misty.

"Good-bye, Miss Mainwaring. Heaven blesses good women, so I think we need not fear for you."

"And good men also," she replied.

Then for one instant Cyril bent his head over the hand in his, and touched it reverently with his lips as if she had been a queen and he the humblest of her subjects. And then—he became aware that the door was open, and that in the entrance stood the figure of his wife. His wife? Was it indeed so? Could it be possible that that white-faced woman, with the eyes that seemed literally to blaze with anger, jealousy, and many other evil passions, was indeed Cicely Stevens?

"Cicely," he cried, moving away from Delicia's side towards the figure in the doorway.

But a warning "Stop!" arrested him. "Do not come one step nearer!" she cried, lifting her hand as if to warn him back. "False husband, false friend, you have both deceived me! No, I will hear *nothing*," as both Delicia and Cyril attempted to speak. "You thought I was a child, whom it was easy to blind; now you see your mistake!"

"You are mad, Cicely!" cried Cyril, raising his voice so that he might be heard; and, noting Cicely's wild words and blanched face, Delicia really feared that his words were the right reading of the riddle.

"No, I am not mad," Cicely cried, scornfully, "though I daresay you wish I were! No, not mad," turning towards Miss Mainwaring, "but heart-broken! I suspected long ago who it was that was stealing away his love bit by bit, and teaching him to neglect me."

Again Cyril would have stopped her if possible, but she would not heed, and he turned away with a gesture of misery.

As to Delicia, she stood like a woman turned into stone. It was impossible that it was at *her* that this storm was directed, so she said nothing, but immovable, as if in a dream, listened to Cicely's passionate tones.

"I knew it, though I could not prove it. But this afternoon, when he had stung me into wild passion by his neglect, and I had retorted, and we had quarrelled more fiercely than usual, he told me he should go to one who never made him feel un-

welcome. So when night fell, and still he did not return, I knew where to find him."

She paused, almost choked with her own vehemence, and, Miss Mainwaring making no answer, lifted her head and looked straight at Cyril. He did not speak, only his eyes wavered away from the fearless grey ones looking into his.

"Cicely," he cried, "we have had enough of this. You must come away from here, and you shall hear the truth."

"The truth!" she laughed scornfully; "and from *you*!" And then swiftly changing her tone, "No; it is too late for excuses—for the truth, or for any thing, now—except *this*!"

She threw something as she spoke across the room—a something which hid itself in a dark corner by the sofa, and which Cyril, almost unthinkingly, stooped to seek for. When he rose up again, the angry, passionate girl who had stood in the doorway a minute since was gone, and in his hand he held a narrow gold circlet—Cicely's wedding-ring.

Miss Mainwaring was still standing in the same position she had occupied during all that terrible interview, and Cyril turned to her, an unspoken question in his face.

"Go," she said; "take that poor girl home; she has gone down-stairs."

But the closing of the hall-door proclaimed that Cicely had already departed.

"Ring for Grey, please," said Mr Stevens, "and ask how she came."

Delicia did so ; and whilst awaiting the servant, remained quite still, in the attitude in which she had listened to Cicely's reproaches.

But at length, when the butler's ponderous step was heard on the stairs, Delicia lifted her steady eyes and looked at Cyril. "Mr Stevens," she said, quietly, "did you know that Cicely was jealous of me?"

He made no answer, but his eyes did not meet hers.

Taking no notice of his silence, "And knowing it, you yet continued to come here day after day, causing her bitter heartaches, and giving me a ceaseless cause for regret for all the years to come."

And then Grey was in the room, and Miss Mainwaring turned to ask him, as calmly as she could, whether Mrs Stevens had left in a cab.

"No," Grey replied ; he thought not. Rebecca, Miss Mainwaring's maid, had been passing through the hall when the bell rang, and had let Mrs Steven in. She had told her not to announce her, as she had only come to give Miss Mainwaring a message. "And knowing as Mr Stevens was here——"

"Yes, Grey," Miss Mainwaring made answer, "that was all right ; but who opened the door when she went ? All I want to know is," with well-intentioned diplomacy, "whether Mrs Stevens went straight home, or only across the Square ?"

"Across the Square, I should think, ma'am ; for I was down-stairs, and I never heard a cab leave the door. Mrs Stevens let herself out."

"Thank you, Grey." And then, turning to Mr

Stevens, "You had better go across to 39; I should think Cicely will be waiting there for you to take her home."

And Grey retired, feeling certain, notwithstanding Miss Mainwaring's calmness, that there was something wrong; but being old and discreet, he kept his thoughts to himself, and did not air them in the kitchen.

After the servant had gone, Cyril hesitated a moment, as if half expecting Delicia would say something; but she did not—did not even look towards him; so he crossed the room without even a "good-bye," and went away, still holding in his hand the marriage symbol that his wife had thrown at his feet.

Miss Mainwaring was dimly aware of his departure, although she took no notice of it. Her mind was too fully occupied with the drama she had just witnessed to be capable of heeding trifles. Still, as in a dream, she was listening to Cicely's passionate, taunting voice—still seeing Cyril's face when she asked him if he had known of Cicely's fancies. The whole world seemed failing her, and she sank down into a chair, covering her face with her hands. But then pride and indignation came to the rescue, and in that moment Cyril Stevens was judged with a harsher judgment than Delicia Mainwaring had ever meted out to any one before. At that moment Delicia, stirred to the very depths, mingled no mercy with her justice. Cyril Stevens stood before her, an erring, selfish man, who had been false both to wife and friend. "He knew

that she imagined she had cause to be jealous of me; he knew that I was ignorant of her imaginings—that I was alone, and had no one to warn me; and yet he came here day by day. And once I loved that man!”

And in this thought lay the bitterest sting of all—that once she had loved him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AZRAEL'S SWORD.

“The world goes up, and the world goes down,
And the sunshine follows the rain ;
But yesterday's smile, and yesterday's frown,
Can never come back again,
Sweet wife—
Can never come back again.”

MR STEVENS was in no enviable frame of mind when he found himself in Anne Square. He was very angry with Cicely—that was the predominant sensation,—angry with her for the jealousy which had prompted her to follow him ; above all, angry with her for the passionate words which had lowered him in Miss Mainwaring's eyes. And he quite overlooked the fact, whilst meditating on the results of her waywardness, that two hours ago he had stood in this very spot, having quite determined to leave her to the strife of wondering, pitying, and harsh-judging tongues, which surely is the hardest trial that a woman can be called upon to bear. But no : in his determination to reject the temptation, it seemed to him that all the original intention should

count for nought ; and it was, he felt, the bitterest injustice of fate, that in the very moment of victory he should have been thus humbled. All this must, however, be for the present put on one side, and Cicely must be followed and soothed. Mr Stevens did not really think there was much likelihood of her having gone to No. 39, as Miss Mainwaring had suggested. No ; it was far more probable that she had gone straight home : still it was just as well to make quite sure ; so he crossed the Square and rang the bell.

After some little delay the door was opened. " Ask Miss Stevens to speak to me for a minute," Mr Stevens said to the servant.

Sharp as Betty's tongue might be, Cyril decided with himself she was the best person in the house to confide in. And this night's work could not be kept too quiet.

" Cyril, what is the meaning of this most dissipated proceeding on the part of a respectable married man ? "

Not heeding her. " Is Cicely here ? " Cyril asked. " But no ; of course she is not. "

Instantly the smile faded off Elizabeth's face, and the tones of her voice grew grave.

" What do you mean, Cyril ? Why should you expect to find her here ? Has she left her home ? "

" My dear Betty, what folly you do talk ! " replied her brother, pettishly.

" After *your* question, Cyril, I think mine are easy of comprehension. "

On second thoughts, Cyril felt sorry he had

spoken hastily. Whatever happened, Betty must be an ally on whom he could count; she always had helped him in any real difficulty—it was impossible she could fail him now. So in a lower tone he told her how Cicely had followed him to No. 1, and of the scene that had been enacted there.

“So it has come at last,” said Betty, sadly.

“What do you mean by ‘at last’?” interrupted her brother. “I should have thought *you*, of all people, would have known what a delusion it has been—a perfect mania!”

“Perhaps so; but did you ever in any way tend to lessen the delusion? However, it is no use looking back now, Cyril. You must go home as quickly as you can, and for pity’s sake be kind to her. Poor child! Remember, after all, she loves you,—surely that ought to count for something.”

“Yes, I am going.—Betty.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t say anything to any one here. No one need ever know, need they?” he added, almost pleadingly.

“No; certainly not. You may trust me; and Delicia also, I am certain. Good night, Cyril; the less matrimonial squabbles are discussed, the better always.”

And Mr Stevens departed, to hail the first hansom he could find, and in it to make his way, as speedily as might be, to his own house.

It was not, however, decreed that Elizabeth

Stevens should pass that night in peace, for not many hours later she was wakened by the violent ringing of the hall-bell, and hastily slipping on a dressing-gown, and sallying forth, with an undefined fear of she knew not what, to see what was the matter, she was met by Cyril, who with a white and frightened face told her that he had been home, but that nothing had been heard of Cicely. "Where can she be, Betty?" for once no thought of self mingling with his anxiety, and, as was usual with him, turning towards the strongest person present for support and comfort in his difficulties. And under the stress of this new fear, he confided to his sister the story of the wedding-ring, which he had kept back in his confidences of three hours before.

"Oh, poor child! Poor foolish Cicely!" cried Elizabeth. "What can she have done? Have you been to her father, Cyril?"

"Yes, I went there directly, but he had heard nothing of her."

"You had better give notice to the police," Mr Stevens suggested. "It will be easy to trace her, for she cannot have walked far."

"Yes, I suppose it ought to be done," said Cyril, nervously. "But you cannot tell how I hate the idea," and he looked from one to the other as if he half hoped they would say death would be preferable to recovering her at such a price.

But Betty said, "Yes, father, that is the best plan;" and laying a kind hand on Cyril's arm, added, "Cheer up; we must find her soon."

"I will dress, and go with you," Mr Stevens said, looking at his son's white face, his eyes softening with sympathy; for Mr Stevens was one who, at the moment that the sinner was punished, was always just as grieved as though he had never done aught to merit the lash.

"Do," said Cyril; "don't leave me,"—for the minute forgetting his manhood, and seeing only the kind, tender father, to whom none of his children had ever cried for help or sympathy in vain.

Betty meanwhile went up to dress, and prepare herself for she knew not what; to calm the frightened children, whom the voices had awaked; to soothe her tearful mother; and to utter truisms about everything coming right in the morning, which she was far from feeling the power of herself.

Then when Mrs Stevens had dropped off into a troubled sleep, Betty went into the drawing-room, and looked out into the dull, deserted Square. There is something peculiarly chill and dispiriting in the early dawn when it follows an anxious, sleepless night; and Betty, watching the cold white mist which enveloped the earth as if in a shroud, shivered, and felt nervous and despondent.

She waited and watched till the mists dispersed, and a bright April sun was shining, that turned to diamonds the dew-drops on the dingy old Square trees beneath, and then she moved away, and ran down-stairs to let in two approaching figures.

"Any news?" she questioned. But she did not need an answer; it was written in Mr Stevens' sad-

dened aspect and in Cyril's haggard face, which had so terribly altered and aged during this last night's work.

"Poor Cicely!" was all his sister said.

She could not find it in her heart to say a word of blame, looking at the sharp lines about his mouth, and the terrible anxiety in the restless, feverish eyes.

"You must not despair yet."

"I am going home," he said, "to learn if anything has been heard. Perhaps she may have gone back."

"I will stay here," Elizabeth observed; "for she might come here, and *I* am the only one, I know, she would care to see."

"Be very kind to her if she comes," said Cyril, brokenly.

And Betty, scarcely knowing why, threw her arms about his neck and kissed him,—a demonstration of affection she scarcely ever remembered being guilty of before.

But then Cyril, with that heart-broken expression, and that wistful pleading for sympathy in his dark eyes—a sympathy which, however deeply he may have been to blame, perhaps all the greater reason because he had been so much to blame, he stood most sorely in need of—was a very different person to the selfish, unsatisfactory being with whose conduct of late she had been so dissatisfied.

So Cyril departed, and Betty presided over the breakfast-table, and tried to banish anxiety from her face, so that no uncomfortable questions might

be asked ; and then having told Nelly as much as she deemed politic, she went across the Square, to confide this new and terrible trouble to Delicia.

Meanwhile Cyril had made his way to 15 Bute Street, only to hear the same tidings, that nothing had been learnt of the lost one ; had listened to poor old Mr Arbuthnot's expressions of grief and dismay, the tears the while falling fast from his eyes ; and to the torrent of Jessie's young, passionate sorrow, which found a vent in mingled pity and reproaches ; and had then driven to his own home, and was walking up and down, up and down, in the empty drawing-room, where the sofa strewn with various trifles spoke of Cicely's recent presence, with the feeling strong upon him that if he had to bear much more of this suspense he should go mad. As yet it had only lasted—how long was it ? A glance at the clock on the chimney-piece pointed to eleven. Was it possible that only twelve hours had passed since he had stood in Miss Mainwaring's drawing-room, and listened to that passionate, accusing voice, whose angry echoes still rang in his ears ? “ Oh, if I could only hear something ! ” he cried. “ Anything would be preferable to this suspense ! ” All the various forces of his usually vacillating mind for the moment gathered into the one narrow groove of love and regret for Cicely.

And at that moment the servant opening the door told him there was a man down-stairs who wished to speak to him.

Then Cyril knew that his wish was granted, and that news of some kind was awaiting him.

With an effort he nerved himself up to meet it, whatever it might be; no easy matter to one naturally sensitive and nervous to an extreme degree—how much more difficult, then, when in addition there were anxiety, terror, want of sleep, and want of food, to contend with! Even Ann, whose sympathies all lay with her lost mistress, was touched by the concentrated misery in her master's white, drawn face, as he passed her and went down-stairs.

The man was in the dining-room, and thither Cyril followed him. On his entrance he stood up, and held out an envelope, which Cyril took mechanically, and read the name "Mrs Stevens" thereon in Jessie Arbuthnot's writing, with the address, his own, below.

"It was found in the pocket of a lady's dress, who was picked up fainting in the streets last night," the man told him, "and taken to the hospital; and that being the only clue to finding her friends, I have come to see if you know anything of her."

"She is my wife," is what Cyril would have said if he could have spoken, but of a sudden it seemed impossible. "Poor Cicely! poor Cicely!"—those were the only words that would occur to him.

"Where?" he said at length; and then, drinking a little water from a tumbler beside him, "Have you a cab? If not, call one quick."

It was a matter of business to the man, but he

was not altogether unsympathetic, and the sight of Cyril's agony softened him, as it had done Ann. He was a little curious too ; but this was evidently no time for asking questions, so he went out to call a hansom, leaving Cyril alone to await his return.

"Better take a drop of brandy, sir," was his last remark, as he left the room ; and Cyril, with the instinct of obeying, walked over to the sideboard. But as he stood thus he chanced to lift his eyes, and they fell upon the picture of his wife,—Cicely as he had but to go such a little way back to remember her—the soft bloom on her cheeks, the slim white figure outlined against the coloured glass, through which the rays streamed on to the changeful, many-coloured opals,—and with something like a groan he turned away.

All through their long drive he did not once speak to his companion ; it did not even strike him to ask any questions as to his wife's state.

All he could think of was Cicely fainting in the street ; Cicely being taken to a hospital ; Cicely, who all her life long had been petted and cared for and spoilt, lying ill amongst strangers, with no one she knew beside her. When the cab stopped, he sprang out immediately, and ran up the steps, a tall, gaunt figure in the bright April sunlight, not heeding, scarcely understanding indeed, the remarks of the bystanders ; but on, hastily on, with some one who seemed to know what he wished, and said he would show him the way.

A long ward, through whose windows the flickering, uncertain sunlight found its way ; rows of pale

faces on either side, that followed with something approaching interest the tall figure, with the white miserable face and anxious eyes, that had entered with the doctor. Through a door at the further end, and into a small room containing two beds, one of which was empty, and the other——

“There,” said the doctor; or did he only point? Cyril could not be quite sure, for it seemed to him he was losing his senses; but he followed, nevertheless, the direction of the uplifted hand, and saw lying on this bed the calm, still figure of a woman, a baby on her breast.

For a second he looked quietly, almost unconsciously, not seeing any special sorrow for himself in the sad spectacle before him; then all at once a thousand voices seemed whispering in his ears, in his very brain, “That is Cicely!” “She is dead!” “Oh no, no!” he cried sharply, quickly. He did not faint, indeed the shock seemed to have brought back his straying senses; after that one cry he remained motionless, standing there, trying to comprehend what this terrible mystery might mean. This Cicely? It was impossible. Why, only last night—but stay, there is no mistaking that bright head, now that a stray sunbeam has found its way hither; and if only those lashes were lifted that hide the sweet brown eyes, Cyril knows they would be those that once stole away his heart.

But the pretty hands, whose restless movements Mr Stevens in the old days used to admire, are quiet now. Cyril, glancing towards them, breaks down at last, and throwing himself down by the

bed, weeps passionately ; for the sight of that hand without the narrow gold circlet which he had placed there on the day on which he had promised to love and cherish her so long as she should live, rent his heart more than the bitterest reproaches could have done. Did Cyril Stevens, I wonder, weeping those passionate, repentant tears over his dead wife and child, remember how, on a certain proud, happy day, he had stood with his arm about Cicely Arbuthnot, and of how, stooping to kiss the red lips, he had exclaimed, in the first flush of his triumph, "We will see, Cicely, what a grand thing we can make of life *together* !"

Was this, then, *all* that they had been able to make of it ?

CHAPTER XXV.

EARTH SEPARATES AS WELL AS HEAVEN.

“ For, like a child sent out to play,
Our youth has had its holiday,
And silence deepens where we stand,
Lone as in some foreign land,
Where our language is not spoken,
And none know our heart is broken.”

It was the evening of the day of Cicely's funeral, and all those who had followed her to her last resting-place had returned to their own homes—old Mr Arbuthnot to mingle the painful tears of old age over his lost darling with those of Jessie's young despair. Cyril, refusing alike his father's and Mr Arbuthnot's request that he would go back with one or other of them, had returned to the empty house, where every room spoke either of a pretty brown-eyed girl who had stolen away his heart, or of a sad, delicate woman who had been his wife. “Had been.” Up and down in the gloom of the evening Cyril paced, these words ringing in his ears, thinking, as many another has done before and since, that no repentance, no sorrow, was of any avail now, for between him and

the past stood for evermore the silent, impassable barrier of death. At the same hour Elizabeth Stevens, worn out physically and mentally—for the shock and the succeeding strain of the last week had told heavily upon her—was driving with the Fullertons through Anne Street.

"Good-bye, Betty," said Nan, when they stopped at No. 39. "No, I will not come in"—raising two blue eyes all dimmed with weeping to her sister's face. "I think I shall be better alone with little Jack than in this house, where everything reminds me so of her. Oh, Betty dear, I am so afraid we were not always kind to her," said tender-hearted Nan. "What do you think?"

"I do not know," Betty replied, more sharply than she usually spoke to Nan. And then with a kiss, she added, "What do you mean? You were never unkind to any one. Good-night, John." And as Mr Fullerton walked up the steps with her to ring the bell—"I think you had better go home as quickly as you can, for she is tired and overwrought, or we shall have *her* ill next."

"I will take care of her, never fear, Betty."

"I am sure you will," Elizabeth replied warmly, holding out her hand. "I think you and Jack are a certain cure for all *her* ills."

Then the Fullertons drove away; and Elizabeth, half envying Nan her facile tears, which surely could not leave a heart aching so bitterly as hers now did, and at the same time partly understanding that a grief is lightened that another sympathises with, entered the passage.

"Has father come in?" she inquired of Nelly, whom she met at the foot of the staircase.

"No."

"And mother?"

"She has gone to Cyril. She said she could not bear to think of his going back alone to that empty house."

"Dear mother! I am glad. She, of course, is the only person who *could* comfort him, for she is always so sympathetic."

"Yes," said Nelly, softly; "mother is always ready when there is any *real* trouble."

"Yes," Betty acquiesced; "and she is so comforting, because she never stops to ask whether one has done right or wrong, but as long as the trouble is there, she sorrows with the sufferer. Yes, Sarah?"

"There is some one up-stairs, Miss, who has been waiting to see you for some time. I told him that you would not be back, most likely, for a long while; but he said he would rather stay, as he did not know when he might be able to come again."

"Who is it, Nelly?" But Nelly did not know; she had spent all the afternoon with the children down-stairs, excepting those few moments when she had kissed and comforted poor Mrs Stevens, and had started her off to carry the consolation of her warm mother's heart to Cyril's lonely home.

"Well, I will go up," said Betty, wearily; "I don't suppose I shall be long. Nell, tell Susy to get me a cup of tea."

Immediately on parting from her sister, Betty's

thoughts reverted to the sad tragedy that was occupying all their minds, and with slow steps and eyes bent on the ground, she went up-stairs, and opened the drawing-room door. It was only on entering the half-dark room that she remembered Sarah's speech about the "some one" who was waiting to see her. She put on her spectacles, dimly aware of the fact that there was a man in the room standing looking out into the gloomy Square—a man who, at the opening of the door, turned round and faced her. Now with her glasses on, and standing as he did against the background of light, she could plainly discern a tall figure in the sober dress of a Roman Catholic priest.

"I beg your pardon," she said, a little nervously—for she was startled and rendered uncomfortable by mingled short-sightedness and the fast-gathering twilight—moving towards the fireplace as she spoke. "There are matches here; I will strike a light."

"Thank you,"—in a quick, decided voice, as a little circle of light from a candle illumined one end of the room,—“I need not have troubled you, for I am afraid I cannot stay much longer.”

At the first sound of his voice Betty turned sharply round. "Who are you?" she said, defiantly; "I do not know you."

"Do you not, Miss Stevens? I should not have fancied your memory was so short. We parted angrily one March evening a long, long time ago, and I said then, you remember, that you should see me once again. But"—as Betty seemed about

to speak—"do not think any angry revengeful feelings have brought me here to-day, such as prompted *that* speech. No, indeed no; only I have always felt I spoke as I had no right to speak *that* night, and of late I have felt that I could not go forth to my new work without an attempt to gain your forgiveness,—so here I am."

All the while that he was speaking, Elizabeth stood perfectly still gazing at him, the glimmer of light behind her throwing out her tall graceful figure and smooth dark head; and gradually, as Mr Elliot looked, it was borne home to him that in those dark, woe-begone eyes, in the white face—white now to the lips—and tightly-clasped hands, there lay some terrible, unrevealed tragedy.

"Miss Stevens," he went on, as she still did not speak—for Elizabeth, true to her natural instincts, only sought how best even in this unguarded moment to hide her secret—"I would not have come to-day after hearing your sad news,"—this was how he was translating her evident distress,—
"but this is the first time that I have been in the south, and I am not likely ever to be here again; that is the only excuse I have to offer."

"Where are you going?" Elizabeth asked, in an uneven voice, most unlike her usual sharp tones.

"To China. I could never settle down into the ordinary parish priest with the ordinary well-behaved flock. No; I am strong and young, and I should never be able to put up contentedly with that sort of humdrum life, so I am going out as a missionary. You understand now, hearing that,

why it is I am anxious to have a settling up of all old errors and mistakes. I should not like to begin a fresh life with any unforgiven sins from the old life hanging about me."

Then for the first and only time in her life Betty's armour was pierced—the weak place discovered. But perhaps, even now, such would not have been the case if it had not been for the great sorrow that had been occupying her mind all day. One deep, tearless sob broke from her; then, surprised and ashamed, she covered her face with her hands.

"I have startled you," Mr Elliot said, "coming to you in this way, after such a terrible day as you have had, too." And as he thus spoke, looking the while at the bowed figure in the heavy black dress, he began to comprehend that this sorrowing woman before him was very different to the sharp, sarcastic Elizabeth of old days, who had fascinated, yet at the same time repelled him.

"Did you never hear that I had become a priest?" he asked, a minute later.

"No, never," but she did not look up.

"That is strange. Well, that was what I wished to talk to you about that same March evening. I was hesitating then, drifting out of the groove in which I had been brought up—for this was always my vocation—and that night I intended to tell you my difficulty, and to leave it to you to decide my life for me."

"What was the choice?" she asked in a cold, still voice.

"Need you ask? I think not. I own, you see, that I did waver for a time; but your sharp words that night drove me to seek relief in duty,—and I have found it," in a lower voice.

A low cry broke from Elizabeth's lips, and that cry seemed to throw a light upon her actions.

With a sudden impulsive movement, almost as if he were the quick-tempered Tom Elliot of old, he strode to her side. "Speak," he said, hoarsely; "were you false as well? Did you needlessly break my heart?"

"Yes, surely," she cried, "even as I have broken my own."

"Look up."

Elizabeth lifted her tired eyes, and in their sorrowful depths, in the sharper lines about the mouth, he read the story of these last three years.

They looked at each other, then, a few moments in silence,—these two, who had so carelessly built up the wall between them, that only death might now destroy. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "What was your object?—or had you *any* object?"

"Oh, I do not know," she cried, shrinking back and hiding her face. "There is no use asking me to account for it."

"No, there is, as you say, no use," he echoed, sadly.

"Mr Elliot," she interrupted, lifting up her head, and looking at him more like the proud, self-willed girl he remembered, "though I blame myself, of course, still I do not exonerate you. If I was bitter, sarcastic—whatever you like to call it—surely you

were unjust and impatient. No," folding her arms, "I cannot feel that I alone am guilty." This resumption of her natural manner calmed Mr Elliot. Mutual recriminations seemed almost absurd in view of the vast desolation with which a few hasty words had laid bare their lives; and in the quiet tones that these years of training had been striving to teach Tom Elliot, he spoke—

"We were *both* to blame—there is no doubt of it, Miss Stevens. Far be it from me to attempt to altogether justify myself, but I think you should bear in mind the fierce battle that I was fighting the whole time,—a battle between love and duty——" he paused. The defiant look had faded off Betty's face, but her eyes were still resolutely lifted to his. "Duty conquered," he said, slowly, "perhaps because the love was denied me; though it is a humiliating thought that I did not give up my own will until I saw that all efforts to gain it would be fruitless. I do not say all this in self-defence, only that you may not disparage the price of the victory. I pray you may never know such days and nights of anguish as it cost me."

"And have I not known them?" cried Elizabeth, passionately, clasping her hands. "Has not my heart been breaking little by little, during all these days and weeks of sorrow that have been crowded into three years?"

Mr Elliot turned away from the sight of that hopeless sorrow that it was beyond the power of any one, least of all of him, to lighten, and walked once up and down the room; and then, a little un-

steadily, "Why did you not write?" he said. "You knew that a word *then* would have brought me back."

"Write!" she repeated, and there was more sorrow than anger in her words; "I think you have forgotten what Elizabeth Stevens was like."

"True, true," he assented; "you would have doomed me to any amount of sorrow—even, so it seems, have suffered yourself—rather than have done one little act that would have proclaimed you to have had the tenderness of a true woman. Nay, I do not mean to be harsh," as he noted the shudder Elizabeth gave. "To speak fairly and honestly, as one can do of a subject when between us and it there lies a new-made grave, I think that in the years to come I shall discover that duty offers rewards that love—when it is only another name for selfishness—could never do. Already, indeed, I am learning to be content, and to feel that if the wish of my heart had been granted three years ago—and for *your* sake I had counted as nought an oath sworn to a dying mother, and registered in heaven—I should in time have found out that a marriage laid on such foundations would even here have been less soul-satisfying than a life of renunciation."

Mr Elliot spoke warmly, with all the enthusiasm of one strong with the strength of self-sacrifice. Elizabeth, listening to him, noting his worn face and kindling eyes, recognised that he was not the man she remembered, that,—even as he himself had said,—between his present and past self lay a new-made grave, wherein all the hopes and wishes of youth

were buried deep. The sight of her had for the minute stirred the soil, but that was all. Never, never might she hope again to reach what lay beneath.

There is no surer method of triumphing over a past passion than by filling life with some one grand object, for which we can do battle till we die. And this young, ardent champion, who was just unfurling his banner preparatory to rushing into the thickest of the fight, was not in the least likely to look back with regret to a safe home where, with wife and children, he might have passed his days in peace. At the moment when victory seems possible, at however great a cost, there are few to be found who would give up the struggle and go back to inglorious peace, however undesirable it had seemed to quit it and seek fame at the first.

And Miss Stevens was a woman who knew this truth full well, or if she did not, was quick enough to learn it now; and looking on into the future, she saw a time coming when her name would be a mere faint memory, not even a pleasant one—dimly discerned amongst other shadowy things of the past; and all this because she had never learnt that bitter sharp words, cutting this way and that, are prone to work much woe.

But because we have cut ourselves, is no reason for not crying out when we are hurt; so when it came to pass that Tom Elliot in his enthusiasm demanded neither sympathy nor pity, but only acquiescence in the grandeur of the career before him, Betty's strength, which was only, after all, that of a weak,

passion-tossed woman, gave way; and with a moan wrung from out of the depths of her heart, she sank down on a sofa, utterly incapable of standing any longer. At the sound, Mr Elliot's soul came back to earth—his eyes to the keen, clever face of the woman before him.

"Miss Stevens," he began, and then, leaving his sentence incomplete, walked over to the window, and stood looking out. "*She* cannot love," he said in a low voice, unconsciously repeating aloud the words it had taken him so many months to learn the truth of. "*She* cannot love. She is too proud of her intellect—her cold, bright intellect—to do aught but mock at what she cannot understand." The sweep of a heavy dress across the floor, and Elizabeth stood beside him.

"Stop!" she cried, lifting up her hand imploringly, as if he had struck her. "Stop!" There was a gasp as if for breath. "You are a just, good man, Mr Elliot; you would not, I think, wish to make a most miserable woman even yet more miserable, would you?" And as he would have answered,—"*See*," stretching out her hands, "I spare myself no whit of humiliation—and you know that I am proud—but own that I loved you *then*, own that all these weary years since I have loved you! Listen," as he again would have spoken; "do you care to hear what I see every wet, windy night when I look down a dark street? I see the tall figure of a man battling against wind and rain. I see a proud, rebellious girl, who fears her own heart so much that she seeks refuge in hard, un-

true words—a girl who, later on, remembering the farewell to which she has just listened, consoles herself by thinking ‘he will come back.’ All this I tell you,” lifting those great passionate eyes to his, “that you may *believe*. It is all I ask of you. As you are just and strong and good, judge me in my weakness and folly, and *believe*. Accuse me of pride, wilfulness, folly, madness, what you will, only not of trifling. Find me guilty, if you like, of any infatuation, only believe that I *loved* you.” All the passion of which she was capable shone in Elizabeth’s dark eyes as she thus pleaded. No one looking into that eager, haggard face could have doubted her.

“I believe you,” Mr Elliot said, gravely.

“And you forgive me?” throwing herself on her knees before him. “Say also you forgive me!”

“Yes, I forgive you,” he replied, after a minute’s hesitation. “I forgive you for wrecking my old life, because of the glorious promise that the new affords. Farewell,” he went on. “Going away into that new life, I wish you every happiness in yours. If you have aught in the past to grieve over, let your future be the better, not the worse, for it: that is the chief good I have learnt as yet, and I will leave it as a last word with you. If ever you are tempted to judge me harshly, remember that life has not been easy for me, and that the path of duty was at first hard and distasteful; but,” as the woman kneeling low at his feet did not look up or speak, “remember this also, that our feet once set in the narrow way, we find that there is a higher

joy in life than is to be found in the mere self-willed pursuit of pleasure." He would have gone without another word but for Elizabeth.

"We shall never meet again?"

"Never," he replied, his voice a little shaken by the despairing tones in hers, "in *this* world."

She lifted her great eyes to his face from where she knelt at his feet. "You are a good man," she said; "then, in token that you believe—in token of forgiveness—will you give me your blessing before you go? It may help and encourage me in the life that lies before me."

He laid his hand lightly on her smooth, bent head. "May heaven bless you, Elizabeth, now and for ever;" and after a second's hesitation, "Will *you*, when you pray, remember one who is far away, striving with all the strength that has been given him to bring souls to repentance?"

"You shall never be forgotten," Elizabeth made answer.

Then there were quick steps across the room, the opening and closing of the door, and she was left alone; and Tom Elliot, without one backward glance, paused not till he stood outside in the chilly April air. It was with a sigh, almost of relief, that he turned his back on Anne Square, having thus broken the last chain that bound him to the old life, to enter on the new career which, to his young, confident heart, was opening out before him, rich with all possibilities, unknowing as yet that in the grandest of all earthly careers, as in the lowest, the most selfish, the disappointments that

are born of earth must ever mingle. Left alone, Elizabeth Stevens did not weep over the dead and buried past, did not cry out for fear of the desolate future, as a weaker woman might have done. After all, she was but reaping that which she had sown—a fine, rich harvest had sprung up from the small seeds sown broadcast with a bitter tongue long years ago.

“It was justice, terrible justice,” Betty acknowledged, as she paced up and down in the room where Mr Elliot had lately stood; and excepting his blessing, which still echoed in her ears, and his forgiveness, she had nothing left out of the wreck she had made of her life. He would remember her for ever, if he remembered her at all, as the woman he had forgiven, not as the woman he had loved.

“Elizabeth! Bessie! Betty! or Bet! are you ever coming down to tea?” in Jack’s voice.

Then, “Don’t make such a row,” from Bob; “what a heartless little beggar you are!”

A quick, “I’m not more heartless than any one else because I want my tea.”

A scuffle outside the door, during which Betty rapidly blew out the candle. “Don’t quarrel, boys,” she said, trying to separate the combatants; “come down-stairs with me.”

No time for Elizabeth Stevens to mourn over a lost love or a blighted life. With a little hectic spot burning on either cheek, and the unnatural brilliancy of her eyes hidden behind her spectacles, she dispensed tea and bread-and-butter, listened to

the children's comments on the strange priest they had seen depart, and whom Nelly had recognised ; told to the curious the story of Tom Elliot's life, and of the work he had entered on,—all this without a break in her voice. Later on, finding Susy weeping grievously, and striving to comfort her, she drew from her the confession that she had never liked Cicely, and that she was so sorry now.

All these various things, coming in the day's work, precluded the possibility of Betty's indulging in any private sorrow. And it was only when the hour of rest arrived and she found herself alone, secure from all interruption, that Elizabeth had leisure to weep scalding tears over the unforgotten, but now never-to-be-recalled Past.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MUCH IS TO LEARN, MUCH TO FORGET.

"She was a woman of a steady mind,
Tender and deep in her excess of love,
Not speaking much."

DELICIA MAINWARING was standing alone in her dark, old-fashioned drawing-room, meditating. Yes, meditating, or day-dreaming, though it was three o'clock in the afternoon; so that there was not even the excuse of firelight or twilight for such an unheard-of proceeding.

Her plain black dress fell in straight folds about her tall figure; for though six months have passed since Cicely's death, Miss Mainwaring still wears mourning.

What is she thinking of, we may wonder, as she stands thus? Not leaning against anything, or fidgeting, but calmly erect, with hands lightly clasped—the whole attitude suggestive of strength and repose.

But though all about her is so much the same, there is a faint trouble visible in the depths of the dark grey eyes. This woman, one would say, is no

longer only a calm unmoved spectator, or even a tender comforter—she also has been down into the arena. For the sympathy of the ignorant, and of those whom suffering has taught, is widely different; and sorrow would never embitter Delicia Mainwaring, as it might have done Elizabeth Stevens.

What is it, we may wonder, that has taught Delicia the meaning of the word “sorrow”? What is it she is thinking of, her face the while bearing that expression? Is it because of the tragedy that darkened the lives of her friends over the way, and in which she had her share; or is it for the loss of a friend who had said “farewell” to her this Christmas-time past—a friend whom she had never seen since?

“I cannot understand it,” she said at length, speaking aloud, as was often her custom when alone. “I thought when he came back to England” —she paused, and walked slowly once up and down the room. “But Betty says she has seen him often, so I can only suppose what he said *that* afternoon was just the truth, and that that was to be the end of it.” And then, her face flushing a little, “I hope Elizabeth will not mistake my expressions of surprise when I heard he was in London—had even been to their house—for it would not do if she were to say anything to him.”

Here Delicia became aware that she was dreaming over impossibilities, and questions to which she might never hope to obtain an answer, and otherwise wasting her time; so with a quick sigh, and

a low "I wish *he* had not said he would come to-day!" she drew a chair up to the writing-table, and set herself to the task of copying music.

She had not made much progress, however, when there was a loud ring at the bell, followed by steps on the stairs, and Cyril Stevens entered the room.

"Poor Cyril!" "Poor Mr Stevens!" That was what every one who saw him said, speaking according to their several degrees of intimacy; and Miss Mainwaring was no exception to the rule.

Her heart ached whenever she saw the thin haggard face and sad forlorn eyes, and there is scarcely anything she would not have done to restore to him the peace of an easy conscience. What was it about the man that proved so attractive, even to those who could not but acknowledge that his faults were many and grave?

Even Delicia, who had felt on the night that Cicely had denounced her that Cyril Stevens had for ever forfeited all claims to her regard, had long ago granted him forgiveness, and had striven her best to turn his repentance into a right groove by the power of sisterly sympathy and affection.

But notwithstanding her pardon, and the fact that he had leant more than ever against her since the shock and terror of that April night, Cyril had never appeared since then at No. 1, and he glanced nervously round on entering, as if dreading a revival of the horrors of that night in his mind.

Miss Mainwaring saw and recognised the reason of that quick look, and it pained her deeply to note

the associations that were wound about her home. She rose, and putting her music on one side, took out a piece of needlework—and thus employed, somewhat ceased to think of what had troubled her; Cyril meantime, in the charm of her presence, also gaining temporary forgetfulness. It is strange what a different effect sorrow has on different people: some it seems to embitter; some it teaches quick sympathy for all and every form of suffering; with some, again, it is a wound which they are willing to exhibit to every passer-by, for the sake of the pitying words the sight of it is sure to draw forth.

Of this class was Cyril Stevens; and it was for the sake of pouring forth his repentance and his grief into compassionate ears that he had sought Miss Mainwaring, who, he was assured, would not feel harshly towards him, which was in itself a relief to his sensitive mind—burdened now with the fear that the whole world knew of the terrible ending to his short married life.

And Delicia, understanding this, strove with all her power to turn his thoughts from unavailing remorse to true repentance, which might yet lead him to make a better, a grander thing of life in the future. For there were moments when the dark horror of the past enveloped him so completely, that she almost feared the brain being unable to withstand the strain laid upon it.

It was not that dead Cicely was really dearer to him than the living wife had been—for it was in Cyril's nature to be more influenced by those about

him than by any past memories—but the fact of those terrible, never-to-be-forgotten words which she had uttered, that had placed him once and for ever so unmistakably in the wrong, which caused him sometimes to feel, when the remembrance of it was more strongly upon him than usual, that he was his wife's murderer;—the man who had changed that pretty, brown-eyed girl who smiled down upon him out of her frame day by day, into the still, white woman he had seen in the hospital-ward, with the tiny rays of sunlight playing about her bright hair.

And it was for this he sought Miss Mainwaring, —for the sake of the calm, tender support of her presence, of the sympathetic yet practical view she took of his troubles, which precluded, when with her, any of the remorseful horror that visited him when alone.

"Are you painting anything, Mr Stevens?" Delicia asked, willing, if possible, to direct his thoughts into pleasant channels, and not, on this visit to her home, to dwell too much on the tragedy that had been enacted there.

"No, I cannot paint," he replied, moodily. "If I do try, *her* face always appears between me and the canvas. I have done nothing in that way for six months."

"I think that is not right of you," said Delicia quietly, letting her work fall into her lap and lifting her eyes to his. "I am sure that we are acting wrongly when we let anything, excepting it be illness, interfere with our performing our ap-

pointed task. Work was not given us just to amuse us when we are well and happy, but as a daily task, to be performed whatever our frame of mind may be."

"You may be right, but all the same I cannot," cried Cyril, despairingly. "Oh, Miss Mainwaring, I think there must be a curse resting on me; it seems so utterly impossible that I should ever achieve success."

"The *elements* of success lie in ourselves, Mr Stevens, and we alone can bring them forth." Miss Mainwaring spoke gravely, yet her heart ached over the tempest-tossed, irresolute man before her, in whom the elements of success indeed lay, but without the strength necessary to bring them forth.

"The artist soul within me is dead," he went on, not heeding her interruption, rising and hastily pacing up and down; "my home broken up, my wife dead, all the future dark and dreary before me, all the past overshadowed by the remembrance of an ever-present horror. I sometimes fear," throwing himself into a chair and burying his face in his hands, "that I am going mad."

Delicia did not start, or exclaim, or laugh away his words; they were too serious for a light answer.

"Mr Stevens," she said, folding her hands above her work, and striving to speak steadily, though at the sight of the misery of the man before her she felt her eyes grow dim, "Cicely is dead—gone beyond the reach of our voices—and nothing you

can now do or leave undone can blot out that last sad chapter of her life ; but think you that weak unavailing regret, or constant morbid consideration of the past, is a *great way* of showing repentance, or the right spirit in which to receive punishment ?” Miss Mainwaring spoke strongly, knowing that the case was one which required prompt treatment ; for she felt assured that if she listened to Cyril’s self-tormenting doubts and fears, let him for ever dwell upon that scene which had so burnt itself in upon his memory, in all probability that which he feared might in time come to pass—he would go mad.

And Cyril’s nature was not in the least altered since the days when he had required a sympathetic listener for his imaginary grievances ; only that, instead of these latter, he had real grief now to mourn over,—so that if he had no *confidante* ever ready to talk over the past with him, the chances were that he would brood less over it, and there was always so much danger of his growing morbid.

And Delicia knew all this so well from long experience—hence her somewhat chilling speech, which followed his burning words like water on fire. For a second Cyril remained quiet, his face still hidden, and then, rising to his feet, began again restlessly to pace back and forth.

“Yes, you are right,” he exclaimed, “I am wasting my life, and I seem to have no power to avoid it. The loneliness and the misery prevent me from working. Miss Mainwaring,” suddenly changing his tone, and standing still in front of her, “my

courage is all gone. I do not know how to ask you, but will you be my wife? No, do not scorn me, do not think I am heartless, but listen to me first. I love you,—ah, how I love you! I did not understand it before; I thought—no matter what I thought—but *now*, Delicia,” speaking her name in that soft, sweet voice which once had so stirred her heart, “have pity on me! Make me wait any time that you will; say to me just what you like, only promise me that in some happy, indefinite future you will become my wife.” He was kneeling by her side now, his hands holding the firm white ones, the while he waited for her answer.

It seemed such mockery! That was Delicia’s first thought. Here, in this very room, where he had turned away and left her, after having aroused the first strong love of her heart, that he should return to offer her the fragments of his ruined life—here, in the room where she had bravely combated with her love and conquered it—at the cost of how many sorrowful hours, she alone knew. Then her eyes fell upon the worn face raised to hers, with all the many lines that care and sorrow had drawn about it, on the dark sad eyes, on the thin restless hands clasping hers, and the momentary indignation passed.

“Mr Stevens,” she said, in a low voice, “I am more grieved than words can say. No,” as he would have spoken, “you must hear me now. I do not think you heartless, so you must not imagine it is that,—but it can *never* be.”

"Oh, do not say so!" he pleaded. "Not for years, if you like; I would wait any time, but give me some hope."

"There is *no* hope."

"Delicia!" he cried impetuously, clasping her two hands tightly in his, "just tell me this one thing,—that it was not by my own folly and wavering that I missed my chance in life,—would you have married me three years ago?"

The colour flushed up into Miss Mainwaring's fair face in a quick sudden blush that faded as quickly as it came.

"That is not a fair question, Mr Stevens," she replied, striving to draw her hands away from his. But Cyril would not be balked.

"Fair or unfair, I will have an answer," he cried, with sudden fixity of purpose. "Yes or no?"

"Yes," Delicia replied, quietly. She did not blush now, her eyes even did not droop beneath the passionate gaze of those other eyes; and Cyril of a sudden understood it, understood how that, by hesitation and trifling in those old days, he had, as he said, lost his chance;—but failed to understand, even yet, how that to a woman like Delicia Mainwaring it was utterly impossible to return to the worship of an idol that had been long dead and buried—an idol, too, that on digging up she discovered to be full of flaws and stains of earthly weakness that she had failed to observe when, in the old days, she had seen it only in the light of love.

"Oh, Delicia," he cried, "you who are so strong,

so good, it is impossible *you* should change! Is there nothing in your heart that answers my passionate words?"

"Nothing," she said, and her eyes slowly filled with tears—"nothing."

"Do you hate me?"

"No," she replied, gently; "far from it."

"Would that you did," he cried; "then there might be some chance for me; but as it is——" He did not complete his sentence, but he understood then and for ever that the old dream was dead: had not died a violent, passionate death—no murderous hand had stabbed it in the full pride of life—but that it had faded away slowly but surely; and to this death, as Cyril knew full well, there is no resurrection. But the bitterness of the knowledge no words could tell. To feel that that for which we long might once have been ours, but that now, no prayers, no tears will gain it for us. Ah! is there any suffering greater than this? Cyril, reading his doom in those serious eyes, which never once wavered away from the fire in his, laid his head down upon the hands he still clasped, and wept passionately.

"Oh, Cyril!" cried Delicia, as she felt the hot tears on her fingers, her whole soft womanly heart touched at the sight of suffering she was powerless to alleviate, "what can I do? I *would* love you—if I could—but——" Even the sight of that kneeling figure before her with bowed head, in such deep grief, could not blot out from her remembrance the ever-present vision of a broad-shouldered, grey-

headed man, with quick dark eyes;—and to honest, single-hearted Delicia Mainwaring all possibility of marriage was prevented by this other love, hopeless though it might be. So all she could do was to repeat, “But it is impossible. Cyril, dear Cyril, a sister’s love I can give you—indeed you have had it for a long time—but a wife’s love, I have it not to give!”

“Forgive me,” he said, rising, and brushing the tears out of his eyes: “you have a great deal to forgive. I have behaved villainously to you all my life,—been rude and rough even this afternoon; but, for the sake of my love and my sorrow, you will forgive me. Good-bye.” He held out his hand; but at sight of the sweet, grave face, and pitiful grey eyes, he hesitated again, and the tears rushed back. Then with a sudden effort—“Good-bye,” he said, brokenly; “you will never know what you have been to me;” and so departed, bearing away with him, then and for ever, the vision of Delicia Mainwaring as his ideal of gentle womanhood.

It was written in the book of fate that Mr Stevens was not the only man whose eyes were to be cheered by this same vision on that October afternoon; for Miss Mainwaring had yet to receive another visitor. This one made his appearance much later. It was six o’clock when he rang the bell; but Delicia was still sitting just as Mr Stevens had left her—her neglected work in her lap, the lamp still unlit, her tea untouched, when Grey, opening the door, announced “Mr Rayton!”

If a thunderbolt had fallen at her feet her reverie could not have been more startlingly interrupted. The sound of his name, the sight of his face, set her heart so wildly beating, that it was all she could do to speak quietly in answer to his "Good evening, Miss Mainwaring."

Mr Rayton was nervous also—it was evinced by the pause he made before speaking. It was clearly understood by both of them that this was no ordinary afternoon call, in which commonplaces might be freely uttered to fill up the chinks of conversation, so Delicia remained quite still, waiting.

However, Mr Rayton was too straightforward not to come to the point as speedily as might be; he just waited long enough to insure his voice possessing its usual steady tones, for the first sight of those serious grey eyes had a little discomposed him, and then he began: "I must apologise for a late call, and for coming in a little unexpectedly, which, I fear, has startled you; but I was calling opposite, and Miss Stevens told me that you had expressed surprise at my not having been to see you when you heard I was back in town."

Miss Mainwaring took up her work, but it was a vain pretence; her hands were trembling so that she was unable to hold the needle. That was all, however; she lifted her head, and speaking quite calmly, said, "I may have done so, but in my heart I did not feel it."

"Why not?" It was Mr Rayton who was outwardly the more agitated of the two.

"Because," she replied, her eyes falling beneath his, "I understood that when you said 'good-bye'

to me last Christmas, that it was not for months, or for years even, but for ever."

"And did it make so little difference to you," he cried, impetuously, "that you did not even care to ask my reason?"

"I was certain—I *am* certain," she corrected, "that your reason is a good one; and that if it were possible I should have been told it."

"Thank you, Miss Mainwaring. I think you are the noblest woman I ever met."

"I have not known you all these years," she replied, softly, "to doubt you now."

"My life, then, has not been altogether so unfortunate as it sometimes appears, if I seem worthy to *you* of trust. But you understand"—he spoke almost pleadingly—"that it is terrible for me to say 'good-bye' thus, without offering any reasons why our friendship is forbidden—that only the most grievous necessity——"

He broke off abruptly, and rising, walked towards the fireplace, and stood there, looking down at the figure of the woman with the fair, bent head.

But Delicia raised her steadfast eyes to his. "*I think* I understand," she said, quietly.

"No, no—that you cannot do. You must take me on trust."

"I do. But just tell me——" Then she paused.

"Go on—ask me anything; and if I can, in common honesty, I will answer you fairly."

The colour rushed up in a scarlet flame to Miss Mainwaring's face as she spoke, betraying what the question cost her; but her voice was quite steady,

though very low, as she said, "You are not married?"

"No." The answer came sharp and stern.

She raised her eyes to his, and there was just the faintest gleam of anxiety, which Mr Rayton was quick to note.

"Nor engaged?"

"No."

"Thank God!" The words were almost inaudible; they passed her lips more like a sigh of relief than a spoken sentence; but Mr Rayton heard them, saw also the momentary anxiety fade out of the grey eyes, and for the minute forgot all the resolutions which he had made, and considered himself so certain to keep—forgot everything save the woman with the sad, sorrowful eyes and drooping mouth.

"Miss Mainwaring! Delicia!" he cried, the words escaping him almost in spite of himself—moving quickly to her side as he spoke. "I am not indifferent to you, am I? You do care——" Then abruptly checking himself, and with an effort recovering his calmness: "I am speaking wildly; you must forgive me. I am going now to tell you a story. After what I have said, I owe it to you."

He took up his old position by the fire, his elbow resting on the mantelpiece; and in an unnaturally quiet voice—the eager, restless eyes betraying him the while—"the story is soon told," he said. "More than twenty years ago, in this old-fashioned room a long-forgotten tragedy was enacted. You wonder

how I know? Never mind that part of it, suffice it that I do. In this room, then, a battle was fought,—violent, passionate words were met by cold, harsh ones. A headstrong youth refused to be forced into a profession that he hated, and as a punishment was for ever shut out from a father's love and forgiveness!" He paused and glanced at Delicia, who was sitting perfectly motionless, with tightly-clasped hands. "Do you remember anything of this? No; you were too young perhaps," he went on, speaking more rapidly. "There was a child—a little, fair-haired, serious child—who was a witness of the quarrel. The men did not heed her at first, so small and insignificant was she. Later, when their anger grew, and the father bid the son begone for ever from his sight, and never, so long as he should live, darken his door again, the child, terrified by their violence, made her escape. They—the men—noted as little her absence as they had done her presence; but when, a few minutes later, the boy departed, forbidden for ever to cross again the threshold of his home, as he was hastening down the stairs, filled with bitter, revengeful thoughts, he was arrested by two soft, small hands—by a pitiful child's voice that said, 'Cousin Philip, you will not leave us?' You remember? You *are* remembering."

"He is dead," said Delicia, in low, even tones, like those of a person in a dream. And then, looking up pleadingly—"He died long ago!"

"No, Delicia; he is alive," said Philip Rayton, folding his arms and looking at her, as if nerving

himself for all she might have to reproach him with. "I am he."

"Oh, poor Philip!" she cried; and even in that moment of enlightenment, of intense surprise, her voice lingered caressingly over his name.

Mr Rayton noted it; but he did not make any gentle reply to her pitying cry—did not move a step nearer to her as he went on,—“Now you see, of course, why I have told you this story,—now you understand why, as you and I may never——” He stopped, and altered his sentence. “Now you understand why we may never be anything but the merest friends—at least not yet.”

“No, I do not understand,” she replied gently, lifting her wide, steady eyes, full of expectation. “It seems to me that if this that you say be true, being kinsmen, we are more bound than ever to be friends.”

“But we cannot be *friends*,” with a slight stress on the word. “And so having told my story, I am going away, carrying with me, as a part of this dear old room, the memory of the best and noblest woman I ever knew,—the woman who has taken the place that was once held by the fair-haired child with the serious grey eyes——”

“What do you mean?” she interrupted, striving to speak calmly. “I cannot understand you.”

He looked at her for one second, gently, tenderly, and then, turning his eyes away and fixing them on the dark outside world, said, “You heard the will, did you not? No,” as she would have spoken,

"it was a just will, if a little hard. There was no reason why he should have remembered me."

No need to repeat to Delicia that unforgotten clause in the stern old man's will, which had cost her many tears when she had entered into her inheritance, but which she had in time dried, remembering that he for whom she wept was dead—he whose place she had taken, and from whom a father's dead hand had been stretched out to separate her for ever.

"All is to be forfeited,—house and money—everything,—if in future years she marries my son Philip Russell." Were those the words written on that terrible night when he had cast off his son so long ago—those the words Mr Somers had read that day, and which with those few tears she had consigned to oblivion?

Was it possible that a man could carry unforgiveness in this manner beyond the grave? Was *her* heart to be broken, and the crowning sorrow dealt out to Philip by that old man, who had intended—yes, she was certain he had intended—on his deathbed to alter that evil, sorrow-dealing clause? All these thoughts passed through her mind as she sat thus quietly looking into the fire, for the minute almost forgetting the presence of the man who had enlightened her; and then with all her strength she strove to comprehend *what* it was that stood between them.

"Why?" she asked herself, and lifting her head looked across to where Philip stood by the uncurtained window, gazing out into the dark, starless

night; on his face reflected the black hopelessness that showed without.

"He loves me. Why?" She hesitated again, and a great wave of colour swept up into her white cheeks. "Ah, I understand!"

And without one instant's hesitation she rose, and through the now almost dark room passed with swift, impatient steps to his side. Mr Rayton started, and looked away from the dim outlines of the trees in the Square garden outside, and from where, below, a barrel-organ was grinding out the strains of "Home, Sweet Home," reminding him of a dull olive-green room, and of a bright-haired girl who had once——

"Philip!"—a hand on his arm brought him back from the land of dreams; "Philip," in a low voice, "you have told me *your* story, now I am asking you to listen to mine. It is short—shorter even than yours. I am quite alone in the world, and"—a pause—"I love you, Philip!"

Mr Rayton's voice was not quite steady, but he answered bravely, notwithstanding, "Delicia, dear, I understand you, but it is impossible. I could not accept such a sacrifice."

Is this the Delicia Mainwaring we have known so long—the calm, tranquil woman whom it seemed wellnigh impossible to associate with aught of passion—this woman with the anxious, tender eyes, pleading in soft, low tones for love, for happiness? Not Cicely's pleading—none of Cicely's little winning ways. Only a woman gravely asking, in all

womanliness, for that of which she stood in need. For Delicia Mainwaring was a queen still, although a suppliant, and even her pleading had a ring of command in it; and a queen may stoop to utter a request and yet retain her dignity, where another, in so doing, would bring herself down to the level of those around.

"The sacrifice *is* great," clasping her two hands about his arm, "but it will be for *you* to make. I," raising her steady eyes to his, "can bring you nothing."

"Delicia," laying his hand on hers, and looking down into her face, "can you give it all up? Remember I am not a rich man, and you may find life hard without all that to which you have been accustomed." His voice was not so quiet as he wished.

"Ah, Philip, I cannot bear to hear you compare them—your love and wealth; you cannot understand me, or you would not speak so!"

"I understand you, Delicia—at least I think I do. But it is only just you should see the other side; it would never do to repent when it is too late."

"I shall not repent," she answered steadfastly, moving a step nearer as she spoke. "You seem to forget I am not a young, romantic girl, but a woman—a woman who has lived such a lonely life, that she craves and asks for your love."

Then Philip hesitated no longer, but took the two soft hands in his, drew yet closer to him the woman who had stooped only to lay the love which he might not dare to claim at his feet; and, "Delicia

—dear Delicia!" he cried, as he bent his head and kissed her.

She was the conqueror she felt, as she stood thus, his arm about her, her head resting on his breast. What mattered then the price of the victory, so that the day was hers? "Delicia—dear Delicia!" Some one had given her that joy-sounding name in her far-off babyhood, her heart echoing the words meanwhile, as she looked on the serene, happy face of her child. But the mother died; and it was only when Philip Russell murmured it in tender, caressing tones, that Delicia understood that her name signified "Delight."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE END CROWNS ALL.

“God keep you pure, oh, very pure ;
 God give you grace to dare and do ;
 God give you courage to endure
 The All He may demand of you ;
 Keep time-frosts from your raven hair,
 And your young heart without a care.”

“Yes, Delicia, I wish you joy—and I not only wish it, but feel quite certain you will get it. And I think it is unselfish of me to say so, for I had other views for you.”

A slight tinge of pink dyed Miss Mainwaring's cheek for a second, and she looked up quickly—nervously. Betty, noting the colour and the glance, and guessing their cause, smiled to herself. “I had always destined you to be the wife of my own especial child, the ‘Infant Prodigy,’ when he should have arrived at years of discretion.”

A look of relief passed over Delicia's face.

“He would have made a very nice husband, I have no doubt.”

“Yes; and he would have possessed some great advantages over Mr Russell.”

"And they are?"

"With him for a husband you would have been able to continue your residence in this dear, delightful, ugly old house, and we should not have lost our opposite neighbour."

Delicia leant forward in her chair. "Elizabeth," she said, looking earnestly at her friend, and laying her hand on Betty's, "will you promise me that you will never think for one moment that there can be any comparison between love and wealth? It was not a question of *possible* loss or *possible* gain, but of winning everything or losing everything."

"Delicia," replied Betty, "I think you are the most perfect, the most lovely, and the most bewitching woman I ever met, therefore I am not the least surprised some one has anticipated Christopher."

"You are very unsatisfactory, Betty; but I suppose you understand me?"

"Yes"—Betty rose and stood by Delicia's side—"I understand you," her voice low and earnest, "though many might doubt my capacity for understanding anything about it. Love cannot be bought or sold, but is given away free, gratis, and for nothing. And once given away," she added, passionately, "no prayers or tears can get it back again: it is gone for ever."

Delicia took the girl's hand in hers, and looked into the agitated face. "Poor Elizabeth!" she said, tenderly, "may not even *I* ever be told the so safely-guarded secret?"

"Secret!" repeated Betty, rousing herself at the word—"what! tell a secret to a woman who is just

about to promise to confide all those whereof she is possessed to a man? No, Delicia; my experience is too great for that. A ring at the bell, a foot on the stairs, which I fear you did not hear or recognise, but which I do, and so shall be gone."

On the stairs Betty met Mr Russell on his way up. "You look ten years younger," she said, pausing; "it does me good to see any one so happy."

"How can you make such an unpleasant suggestion as that it is possible for me to look ten years younger? I feel eighteen; it is cruel to remind me of my grey head and my nine-and-twenty years."

"We will not pursue the subject, Mr Russell," Betty replied, demurely, "or I shall have you reminding me how long it is since I came out!"

"There are some women who are like wine," he said lightly, as he pursued his way.

"Do you mean that they improve with age, or that they are more agreeable when they do not sparkle?" she retorted. But Mr Russell made no reply.

Sauntering across the Square, Betty's thoughts were still with the two she had just left. "Now that is a marriage that was certainly made in heaven, for no amount of obstacles prevented its consummation. They will immediately settle down into a most commonplace, contented couple—a perfect Darby and Joan; and they will always consider themselves a kind of living example of the faith to be placed in proverbs—'Love before wealth,' 'Virtue its own reward,' &c.—which, indeed, it needs

to be, for otherwise some of us would come off but badly. Not that I grudge her her happiness, for I know no one who deserves it more; yet I cannot help feeling what a delightful old maid she would have become—which reminds me,” giving the bell of 39 a violent pull, “that that is just what I *am* becoming,—only no one will ever be able to put ‘delightful’ before the dreaded word.”

And here Christopher, opening the door, disturbed her reverie by exclaiming, “Holloa, Betty!—in the dumps! Why, what is the matter?”

“My dear boy, can you ask, when you know that I have just been across to make a hollow pretence of being *rejoiced* to hear that I was about to lose my dearest friend—that the best and most charming woman I know is going to throw herself away upon—a man!”

“Sour grapes, my dear Betty—you cannot deceive *me*.”

“Perhaps so, Christopher. You should not mock at the sad spectacle of—— I am thinking of a sufficiently poetical simile.”

“A rose!” cried Bob, who had joined them.

“A rose, of course, Bob,—an elderly rose, on the very end of a long branch, from which all the other rose-buds have been gathered,—that is what I shall soon be.”

“Poor, neglected, elderly last rose of summer!” cried Christopher.

“Never mind,” said little Jack, loyally; “you are the only fun in the house, now Nan is married and Susy engaged.”

For the old story was being retold at No. 39.

"Hear him!" exclaimed Betty, with an uplifting of her eyebrows. "To this I am come! 'The only fun in the house!' This is the way that the author of 'Miserrimus' is appreciated! Never mind, Jack, I am grateful for your praise, though it is rather as if one were to say of father that he was a good cook—which he is, but it is *not* the talent upon which he prides himself."

And then Betty escaped from the children, and locked herself into her own room, and wept passionate tears over her own ruined past, and gave a few thoughts to a man hard at work, far from home and friends, striving to bring souls to repentance; then washed her face and went down-stairs to save Susy from being worried, to amuse her father, keep the children happy, and all the other hundred and one cares and interests of everyday life.

There was another wedding in St Margaret's—a quiet, unimportant affair, as compared with those twin weddings of long ago; and the coloured lights that had enriched the red-brown of Cicely's hair one bright June day now shone down on the fair head of Delicia Mainwaring and the tall, stalwart figure of Philip Russell.

Elizabeth was one of the few witnesses of the ceremony; and she, with some other friends, went to No. 1 to taste the cake, which was the only outward show of a wedding that had been allowed; but this the children at 39 had forbidden should be dispensed with.

The short ceremony over, Betty went up-stairs with Delicia whilst she changed her dress, striving to act as far as possible a sister's part by her, so that she should not feel lonely on her wedding-day. Coming down the stairs, "It is the last time," Delicia said. "It is strange, is it not, that I shall never, in all probability, enter this house again—the house where I have spent nearly my whole life?"

"My dear Mrs Russell, it is too late to repent now; the heir-at-law is probably already on his way hither."

Not answering Betty's light words, "Once," Delicia went on, pointing to an old, smoke-grimed portrait, beneath which they had paused, "in the old days, he laughed at me; once, later on, he lifted a hand in warning; I wonder what he says now."

"He says," replied Elizabeth, "in every line of his fat face, that he utterly despises the folly of a woman who throws away the real tangible benefits of a comfortable home and plenty of money for such a romantic idea as happiness when united to poverty."

"Is that what you see in his face, Betty? He looks to me *envious*, as if he were telling me that though he contrived to make a large fortune, yet it did not gain him love, which is the only thing for which life is worth living."

"Thank you, Delicia, in his name, for so kindly interpreting his thoughts; but all the same, you must say 'good-bye' to the forbidding old man, or you will miss your train."

So Delicia Russell departed from the only house

she could ever remember having sheltered her, a poor woman, leaving behind right joyfully all the tokens of wealth that Delicia Mainwaring had enjoyed for so many years, to brighten for evermore her husband's home, with her graceful womanly presence, and the tender sympathy of her eyes; and the benefits reaped from this exchange she considered to be all hers, cheaply purchased at the price of Philip's love and trust, which is surely the highest form of love.

For from that day forward, it was to his wife Mr Russell turned for sympathy, both in joy and sorrow, feeling certain that her eyes would alike reflect the one or the other; and only one little episode in his past history was locked away in his own breast, and never revealed, even to her, for Philip remained loyal to dead Cicely; and the story of that morning in the olive-green room, where a foolish, wayward, bright-haired girl had mistaken for love the fleeting fancy of an hour, remained for ever buried in Cicely Stevens's grave.

No. 1 Anne Square has lost the dignified, serious look it possessed in the days when Delicia Mainwaring reigned there.

The heir-at-law, not fancying its appearance, sold the furniture and let the house to a large, prosperous family, so that children's feet echoed up the steep stairs and about the old-fashioned rooms, which, could they have spoken, might have told such strange stories.

He was a good-natured man, this same heir—a

middle-aged, well-to-do gentleman, living on his own acres in Lincolnshire; and though not averse to the addition to his income from such an unexpected source, which permitted him to indulge in vagaries about pigs and cows which had hitherto been unrealisable day-dreams, yet all the same he felt rather ashamed of himself for taking the money from a woman, who, as he himself expressed it, had only married the man who had, after all, had more right to it than either of them. And warm with virtuous indignation, he expressed his feelings very strongly to his wife, a mild-eyed, elderly woman, on his dead cousin's unforgiving disposition, and on his very high opinion of the woman and the man who had both dared to snap their fingers at his unjust will.

After this ebullition of temper, he sat down and wrote a long letter to Delicia, informing her of his wish that she should select at No. 1 any treasures for which she had a fancy, and take them away to her new home, as a token of respect from her kinsman William Russell. Afterwards he confided to his wife that, their appointed career run, and the time for comforting themselves with the sight of cows and sheep being over, he should, by will, leave back to the children of Philip Russell, should there be any, all that there remained of the legacy.

"Otherwise I should not like to use it, even for the benefit of the farm, fearing a curse might rest upon it."

And his wife, a meek woman, with whom her

lord's will was law, and they being childless, agreed with him in that termination of the business being only just.

All this, however, did not prevent the sale of the contents of No. 1; and Betty was distracted for days by the sight of the familiar furniture and pictures being borne away by proud purchasers—and later on, by that vision of fat, rosy children, for ever running in and out, accompanied by attendant nursemaids.

She went over to the sale herself, and purchased for her own special gratification "Lot 131, Portrait of a City Merchant" (name of painter unknown), and carried it back to the room at No. 39, which Nan used to share, and hung it up as a remembrance of those happy, miserable days, which were now all over and done with.

Cyril—an older and more careworn Cyril than we first knew him—goes and looks at it sometimes, seeing in its well-to-do, contented face, a part of the old life from which he is for ever parted. What would he feel if he knew how Delicia Mainwaring, dreaming impossible dreams one November evening, had stood before it with Cyril's name in her heart, and that "if" on her lips?

But the portrait tells no tales; so Cyril looks and thinks, and regrets the past, yet aimlessly, and leans more than ever against his sister, she being the strongest person at hand; and Betty encourages him to do so, devoting a great part of her life to him, telling Nan she does so because she is so afraid of designing widows, and know-

ing Cyril's predilection for sympathy, feels that he might one day fall such an easy victim.

Nan understands; and in the midst of her crowded life, filled with the joys and anxieties of motherhood, pities Betty, it may be, the necessity which has left her alone to fight the battle of life—and Cyril's battle as well.

And Betty fights well—there is no doubt about that: hides her wounds well out of sight—is always brave and cheerful, and ready to act as champion to any younger, weaker soldier than herself.

Time softens a little the asperities of her character—time, and a certain memory which influences her whole after-life—so that Cyril sometimes wonders if this woman who helps him to bear his burden is indeed the quick, bitter Betty of old, whose sharp speeches so often annoyed him.

But then he does not know of a certain warning given to his sister the night that saw her youth buried—if indeed it were not only a visit paid to the grave of that youth already buried that blustering March evening two years before; does not know, either, of the blessing that night given her, and the words of hope and encouragement to help her through the coming years; does not know, either, of the man far away from England, who had shut himself out from love, and home, and all the blessings granted to most men, to toil through a short, weary day, learning that disappointment is the sad reward of most earthly work—and then to die, and earn a nameless grave in a foreign land.

All this Cyril did not know ; but Betty learnt it, bit by bit, and yet fainted not, but worked gallantly on, striving thus to atone for the faults and errors of her girlhood, and to prove herself worthy of the love which had once been offered her.

And seeing her day by day fulfil her appointed task thus faithfully, Philip Russell is fain to acknowledge that, great and noble woman as is his wife Delicia, yet is she honoured by the friendship of Elizabeth Stevens.

THE END.

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